CORONET

CHRISTOPHER HODDER-WILLIAMS

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'Exceedingly exciting. . . . The action is as vigorous as the plot, and perhaps the most remarkable feature of the novel is the brilliant way in which the author couples the complex ABC of electronics with a high-ranging imagination.'

Glasgow Herald

Fistful of Digits

Christopher Hodder-Williams

CORONET BOOKS
Hodder Paperbacks Ltd., London

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First published 1968 by Hodder & Stoughton Ltd.
Coronet edition 1972

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Printed and bound in Great Britain for
Coronet Books, Hodder Paperbacks Ltd,
St. Paul's House, Warwick Lane,
London, E.E.4
by Hunt Barnard Printing Ltd,
Aylesbury, Bucks.

ISBN 0 340 16666 5

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In this book, all the electronic equipment was installed by TRAX; but here is a list of the people-thinkers:

PEOPLE-THINKERS

At Ding Dong, Cornwall
Peter Shackleton, electronics engineer
Christina Teuson, a Musiconics worker
John Forbes, Peter's business partner
George Verolde, company director
Stan, maestro of Musiconics
Andy, the tea girl
At the Gurnard's Head, Cornwall
People-thinkers whom you'll find there any time
At the Freid Institute, Exeter
Richard Stranger, mathematician
Dr Norman Williams, doctor and philosopher
Ham Nichols, financier
Sue, the nurse
Mr Friend, one of the afflicted
At TRAX Computers Ltd., London
Chris Sedgewick, an executive
Gillie, his secretary
At the Clinic of the Snows, Stradt, Switzerland
Dr Moyen, psychiatrist
Sister Theresa, senior sister
Sister Mary Wilhelmina, on the nursing staff
Lizbet, a little girl
Other people-thinkers
General Cleve Trefathick: U.S. Air Force Liaison at NATO
Rawlins, electronics engineer
The proprietor: Schweizerhof Hotel, Andermatt, Switzerland
Tom, Dick, and Harry, who have an expensive car
Stuart Fellowes, programmer
Dr Irene Pellings, lecturer at Exeter University
Rabbi Ralstein, Stradt, Switzerland
The guide on the dam, Stradt, Switzerland
The headmistress, Stradt School
Julian Forbes (deceased), John's father
. . . and yet other people-thinkers, who are people and thinkers to a greater or lesser extent.

The Beginning

London Airport, Tuesday

To Richard Stranger, Freid Institute.

Dear Richard:

I have the oddest feeling. And as the man who has publicly ridiculed the work you've been doing I feel hardly entitled to communicate it to you. At the same time you may not find it entirely unnatural that I took my son's side . . . however misguided this proved to be.

In a few minutes I shall be flying on holiday to Morocco; and a few days ago I would have sworn that this was my own idea, Now, I wonder.

You remarked, when you visited me that last time at the Ministry of Technology that I had – what was the phrase, exactly? – "submerged my personality completely in this obsession for electronic efficiency" . . .? something like that, anyway. You may remember I was not very courteous in my reply. And if I get back safely from this trip I shall try and improve on it.

I now find myself quite incapable of a decision. You'd think that someone who could sit down in an airport lounge and reel off a letter like this would be able to go to the ticket office and cancel. I can't do so. I know you will think I am not making any sense.

I wonder if the other passengers feel any of this? Richard, you've *got* to believe – for the sake of others in the future – what I'm going to say now: they aren't boarding this plane of their own free will. (I've just heard the final announcement to board. Of course, I will obey. One does.)

The group at the next table . . . they have that very same detached look you've accused me of. They wear sunglasses, all of them . . . dark lenses in steel frames of the sort that baffle; they remove the identity from the face. And I think they also are just rejects from an intolerant world – Would you, I wonder, say an *electronic* world? I pray that I will live to withdraw what I said about your crackpot ideas. . .

God, rambling is the word . . .! But I can offer you just one fact . . . one tangible thing which may help someone, should it turn out that Air Europeda Flight 9A fails to reach its destination. Despite your own personal prejudices (and I seem to remember they date from our dim

and distant Cambridge days) I became a patient of Dr Moyen recently, because I was under heavy pressure of work at the Ministry and was consistently sleeping extremely badly.

Dr Moyen issued me with a machine. I am quite used to machines. (Bitter words, perhaps, they may well seem to you!) This one is a little black box. It is not what is conventionally known as a "sleep machine" but that's what it's for. Or at least, that's what Moyen *said* it was for.

By accident I happened to see inside another passenger's briefcase while he opened it for something or other. Richard, *he* had one . . .! And I have not the least doubt, though I can't prove it, of course (and wouldn't anyway, because I don't seem to have that kind of mental freedom of action), that others among these passengers have got them too.

(I must go in a minute . . . they're all drifting out towards the aircraft . . .)

This made me think, of course. How *did* I come to decide to be on this particular holiday? Or, to put it another way (however looney this may sound) *what did I do to fail the cause of automation?* – See what I mean? How *could* I say this to anyone else? – to John, for instance? Well, you know my son better than I do. I have a feeling that a boy reveals himself to his housemaster better than to anyone else on earth. So I don't have to tell you how *dangerous* it would have been to have confided anything to him. Yes, dangerous! – now I'm afraid of my own son!

I've got to go now. *Got* to? Yes, I think that's the right word.

Julian Forbes

* * *

For some reason the above letter was delayed three months . . . as were other documents which might have explained things.

Part One

FINGERS

Chapter One

It was solely a matter of timing. Had Peter first met her when the weird music was playing, then he would never have followed it up. That curious feature of her personality – the one he so quickly noticed – would have shut him out from the start. Then, he would simply have done what he came down to Cornwall to do, and gone back to London the better for it.

But she was alone in the cottage and the others were still at lunch.

She came to the door as he swung the Mini into the drive and said smiling: "I don't know which one you are but would you like coffee? I've just made some."

He returned the smile. "Is that your job, then?"

"One of them."

"Well, I'm afraid I'm not one of your 'Musiconics' people but that smell of coffee beans is just irresistible."

"Good." She led the way inside. "You must have come to see John."

"Yes . . . He's my business partner." He looked around. "I thought when I arrived that I must have come to the wrong place! But this cottage is cram-full full of our equipment so it must be right."

She poured some extra coffee beans into the grinder. "So you're Peter Shackleton – a rather angry Peter Shackleton, by the looks of things."

"Oh, hell . . . Does it show?"

She chucked a quick, appreciative look. "That wasn't a complaint! Most of our people are . . . I don't know – sort of introverted. It's part of the creed to be enigmatic."

"Are you?"

"That's not for me to decide."

"You aren't very enigmatic at the moment – except about your name!"

"It's Christina." Rattle of cups. "So why are you angry? – or are you always angry?"

"Business-type anger."

"Oh. I shouldn't pry, should I?"

They paused. She floated the coffee on the water she had boiled in a saucepan. He watched this and grinned. "I've always heard," he said, "that Musiconics people were highly scientific . . . Yet you're in an ancient cottage and you make coffee like a peasant!"

"Peasants don't drink coffee."

"If they did, that's how they'd make it."

"Oh, I see . . . Well, perhaps this is how I rebel."

"That the only way?"

She looked at him, then brushed coffee grounds off her fingers by wiping her hands on her jeans. "You don't talk like an electronics engineer at all! Are you sure you're genuine?"

"Do we all have to be the same?"

"Sorry . . . I touched a nerve. How do you like your coffee?"

"With some of that terrific country cream."

"Brown sugar?"

"Great."

"'Great' . . . So you've lived in America? Or am I generalizing again?"

"You are – but I have . . . So why am I a fraudulent engineer?"

"Insufficiently dedicated."

"That's always been my trouble."

"Don't apologize, though . . ." She handed him a steaming mug. "It makes quite a change." She looked away deliberately. "What do you make of John?"

"I'm quite surprised you ask me that question."

"Why?"

"Insufficiently secretive!"

"I'm not always Musiconically orientated."

"That's a nice, official phrase . . . Do you change backwards and forwards at will? – or does it just happen?"

"It depends who I'm with."

"How unreliable of you."

"Yes . . . isn't it a nuisance? So what do you think of John?"

"He's an Etonian."

"If I'd been a boy I'd have gone to Eton."

"Then we're in the clear!"

"What else do you think about John? – apart from his education problem?"

"I think he's far more secretive than even your Musiconics would warrant . . . on account of not telling me about you."

"Well, I'm not his bird so perhaps he would think that irrelevant."

"I wouldn't."

She said: "I don't doubt it" – and they watched each other as the cars drew up outside.

And that was when it happened first – the sudden switch in the girl's entire manner from one state to another state. You couldn't miss it and it was unnerving and absolute.

It was in her eyes as Peter watched her . . . a drop in temperature of the kind that makes good metal crack down the welds.

It was in her body . . . in whose zestful curves a muscular tension abruptly dented their significance, so that she even ceased to move in the graceful, easy manner that had so agreeably turned the coffee-making act into a feminine statement.

Ignoring Peter suddenly, like a courtesan realizing instantaneously that a pretender in the palace was eliciting services to which he had no claim, she turned to Forbes as he came in and said curtly: "Mr Shackleton is here – apparently to see you."

"I can see that!" Unfriendly eyes in sleekly chosen spectacles and a peremptory: "Hallo, Peter. What on earth are you doing here?"

The note from the office which had brought Peter down was an irritating abrasive in his trouser pocket. He could actually feel it against the skin. "You should know."

"Oh . . . that. I'm surprised you're surprised."

Peter watched the weirdies filing in. They looked like immigrants from an over-stocked Chelsea. He said: "And who the hell *is* this Verolde man who wants to take over our firm?"

Two of the immigrants paused, as if dumbstruck by this phrasing and that ignorance.

Forbes glanced from them to Peter, offering a thin smile. "Now you really *have* shocked them!" – then glanced at his watch, as if no lesser man than Verolde was expected any minute.

But Stan, the bearded maestro in the blue jeans, took the floor

in some authority. "Right . . . silence now. That's fine. Amplifiers on? Tape loaded . . .? Oh, Andy love, be an absolute darling and be in charge of Tea, there's an angel?"

Andy, not so much a Twiggy as a straight piece of brittle timber, blushed from the thrill of being given a task, then bravely restrained her emotions with an overwrought, "Of *course*, Stan!"

"Good girl . . . Who's got the score? Where's the score? Christina, seen the score?"

It turned out to be stacked neatly under the spool of tape, which lay enticingly on the console near the machine.

And somehow all was ready, and the dozen or so enthusiasts damped their twitterings to an expectant silence as the maestro pressed the *playback* button and started the tape. An unearthly series of noises exploded from the speakers in the ceiling and the concert had begun. Peter thought it sounded like feeding time in some electronic zoo, whose inmates restively contemplated eating the keeper. The implied relationship between Stan and his tape-recorded charge was a disturbing one.

Peter, half-numbed by the din around him, told himself as he gazed fixedly at the rotating spools that this sensation of misgiving was totally irrational. Yet he couldn't stifle the feeling that the girl was more a victim than a participant. Mudsplashed jeans can be evocative enough of a certain offbeat sex-appeal, but even this she seemed to be suppressing, as if Musiconics wasn't just an art form but a religion. The habit she had of tossing her head, as if her hair were long and loose, instead of quite short and cropped as it was now, seemed again to suggest paradox.

Stan, who every now and then made an adjustment to the elaborate controls on the console in front of him, displayed a benign indulgence towards back-sliding disciples that savoured of farce. In answer to a remark of Peter's he declaimed: "Progressive music does not set out to exclude you. You're making it do that yourself."

Peter glanced at the strangely flattened features and decided the beard didn't help. "I simply said I didn't like it."

Stan folded his arms across a dark green shirt and smiled kindly. "Prejudice," he said, mentally breaking unleavened bread, "is another word for Fear. Listen to this bit," he yapped, offering Peter

a view of the score. "Would you have known that a cymbal, played backwards, could achieve such a texture?"

Peter did look at the score. It didn't tell him much. No reassuring parallel lines tied down the stereophonic subtleties overhead to the mundane rules and regulations of Beethoven or Britten. Instead, a series of black wedges and squares alternated with wild whirligigs. Occasionally there were sudden showers of recognizable music symbols, like the irresponsible platoon of semiquavers which came at the point when someone apparently upset the components of a xylophone all over the floor, and the clusters of contagious-looking pimples that broke out in red ink whenever they felt like it.

Peter turned to watch the girl. At present she was deliberately submerging herself within the dedicated group, though it seemed to cost her an effort because she was so aware of Peter's scrutiny. Her well-moulded face, slightly flushed all the time, showed the tension; all the time she seemed anxious, as if a sudden conflict had been imposed by Peter which rendered it impossible for her to make the choice.

Peter shifted his gaze to include John Forbes, his partner in business – till now. John's black-rimmed glasses gave him the air of an intellectual; and though this intellect didn't respond any better than Peter's to musical appreciation classes of this kind, John had studied history at an in-school before switching, at Cambridge, to Physics, then finally to a skilful combination of Electronics and Social Climbing. The expression was superficially indulgent. After all, Forbes–Shackleton Electronics, their mutual outfit, had supplied most of the elaborate equipment which had been crammed into the cottage with such nightmarish disregard for rustic charm. On the face of it he had good reason to be content; and the note he'd written Peter meant capital gain. Yet the eyes behind the magnifying lenses remained unamused. He again looked at his watch, as if some unforeseen issue had been raised by Peter's arrival that might annoy the awaited guest.

The music died to a more restrained level. This time, as the tape spool unwound its remorseless contents, the jumping pointers of the two playback meters settled, peacefully but uneasily, at their lower end while a series of slow phrases, apparently rendered by an oscillator, descended in steps like pedal notes on an organ.

Stan, like some transistorized messiah, continued patronizingly with his sermon. "What do you seek with your ears, Shackleton? Certainly not the *risk* involved in actually *listening*. Music only gives you direct pleasure if it confirms what you are used to already. You want to go on thinking that life remains unchanged. You sustain your emotional security through repetition. *I* listen because of the innovation the music contains; not for the sense of dependence it generates."

Somebody nodded wisely; and Peter couldn't help admiring the skilful mixture of truth with cant. It conveyed simply that anyone who didn't like his sort of progress was already obsolete.

Peter couldn't reply because there came a massive crescendo that denied him speech. He gazed out of the window, and sympathized with the flock of gulls, sent up in the air hysterically by this renewed outburst of deafening dynamism, on their way to the quiet seclusion of some sheltered bay along the coast. Whichever ancient Celt had actually christened this place "Ding Dong" was now redeemed; and through the open windows into the peace outside shrieked a noise fit to wake the dead. The rugged miners who in a bygone age had burrowed deep for tin refrained, however, from stirring in their graves.

The derelict remains of their industry were still conspicuous in this part of Cornwall. The old blockhouses, made of granite, thrust themselves against the skyline in lonely tribute; engine rooms, their chimneys broken off short, prodded out of the hillside and one of them was visible through the window, in the gathering darkness of late autumn, against a background of bracken and broom.

Peter caught the eye of the girl again, and instantly she looked away. She couldn't altogether conceal her basic sensuality; in evading Peter's glance her lowered eyelids only emphasized yet further the grave, downward slant of fresh features in such conflict with the filigree phoniness around her.

At last it was over. The end of the tape slapped against the jockey mechanism and the automatic switch stopped the machine.

After a suitable silence, the disciples proceeded to outdo each other, not with elaborate superlatives, but rather with heavily contrived understatements to underline the subtlety of the musical event.

"And we've sold it," said Stan, with a sudden and unexpected note of commerce, "to the BBC. It'll be on 'Radio Three' next New Year's Eve."

A huge teapot and a plate of buns were produced from somewhere and Peter was handed a thick cup that was badly cracked and not very clean. And while being further enlightened by one of the disciples Peter continued to watch the girl. Though she was now earnestly discussing some point or other with the maestro, who had to lean across her to reach some knob on the panel he was demonstrating, she seemed to go out of her way to avoid physical contact with the man, as if the mere touch of his hand, on the inappropriate denim she was wearing, would make her shiver. The contact was accidental, but the girl wasn't taking any chances.

Andy obviously belonged in all the ways Christina didn't. "You don't *lose* yourself," she exclaimed to Peter as she poured herself a cup of chokingly powerful tea and plonked herself down on the window seat. "That's why you feel so prejudiced. You *do*, don't you? I *am* right?"

"You weren't in the room during the music so how can you tell?"

She found this funny for some reason. "I wasn't. *Someone* had to cut the sandwiches. But I can guess. You're like the coalman arriving in the middle of Act Two at Glyndbourne. Nobody will tell you where to dump it and you're forced to listen to the opera . . . Don't you think so, Stan?" She blushed, as if addressing the maestro and not getting a reply would be a disastrous threat to anyone's status.

Peter prised himself away from her gritty intensity and joined John Forbes across the room. "My dear chap," said Forbes, "Why be such a compulsive Phillistine?"

"Because I can make all those noises by wiring an amplifier back-to-front by mistake, but I've never called it Art. Can you stand all that din?"

A supercilious eyebrow arched. "I can stand the business. Their next symphonic work entails blowing up the Grand Canyon, or something. That would take at least another thousand quid's worth of sound equipment so now is not the time to upset them." The glint behind the spectacles hardened. "Which you would, if

you were to start anything with that female. Your riveted eyes are more conspicuous than you think."

"How can that possibly worry anybody here? They're not interested. Or are you?"

There was an edge on Forbes' voice. "No. But last time you started one of your wretched involvements it cost me two hundred to fish you out of Cannes, just to sign a contract."

Shackleton rustled the piece of paper in his pocket. "But do you care about contracts? Since when was it normal business practice to sell a business without consulting a partner?"

"Do you object?"

"How can I object when I'm not consulted?"

"You're very stuffy . . . suddenly."

Peter kept his temper. "I think we'd better discuss it now."

"Later," said John, detaching himself.

After that the atmosphere accelerated towards high tension and Peter caught the girl looking at him carefully – apparently frightened – whenever she thought he wasn't watching her. When he did, she frowned angrily and made sure he felt snubbed. And there didn't seem to be any reason for it. Once she turned round and said under her breath, "for God's *sake*!" The only person who failed to notice the ugly atmosphere was the maestro himself, as if in some way his presence was irrelevant.

A large car drew up outside. Someone said: "Our sponsor is exactly on time." There was a stir among them and the man was deferentially met at the door. Peter didn't see him but took the opportunity to speak to the girl, for they were left alone for a few seconds.

He said: "Come outside. I want to speak to you."

"They'll notice."

"Let them."

"I don't want to hurt their feelings."

"You're lying. For some reason you're frightened. I insist on knowing why."

She glanced at the group at the door. The newcomer had his back to them. He was talking to John Forbes. The girl said: "When they start playing music again, go out to your car. I'll follow you out."

"Okay."

The suspense had tightened as if someone was turning a thumbscrew. And suddenly Peter was confronted with the big man who paid the bills.

George Verolde was not ugly in the sense that his features were ill-formed. On the contrary they were regular, even handsome, though the basic coarse quality of the man was in the harsh set of thick lips and the voice he spewed out contemptuously between them. The smile wasn't exactly friendly. "Why is it?" – and the words were intended for the entire room. "Why is it there's always *one* of them . . .? You're Shackleton, aren't you?"

"That's my name."

Verolde nodded. "Yes . . . I'd have known you anywhere. Believe me . . .!" He didn't offer the big meaty hand, but went on: "I'll say this for you: you have quite a reputation in the U.S. – quite a reputation! You know what you're known as . . .? Peter Pan! That's right!"

Christina shot Peter a momentary protective look . . . then it was gone. But Verolde saw it and it seemed to lash him to further furies. He spoke with a silky menace which but for the personality of the man would have seemed hopelessly overdone . . . "You tried to reform M.I.T.*, I'm told. Is that right? – telling them to be good boys and go back to the good earth and grow rhubarb? But they just went right on playing computers, just the same. Did you know they called you Peter Pan?"

Peter found himself shaking from anger and felt deathly inadequate. "What do they call you? – the crocodile?"

Verolde shook his head sadly. "A badly delivered line, Mr Shackleton. Didn't they tell you? In this kind of situation it is so much better to say nothing . . .?"

"I'm not that calculating."

"So they tell me . . . So they tell me!" – and Verolde went off to mingle, busily manufacturing a cordial atmosphere through the device of excluding him. Then Stan found an opportunity of offering Verolde a go of Musiconics. As if this were a cue, Forbes chose the moment to cross to Peter's side.

His attitude was now that of one man of the world to another. "Come off it, Peter! You're not really going to stand in our way, are you?"

* *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*

"According to you, I can't."

"You know you stand to do very well out of a sale?"

"At this time? Forbes-Shackleton – with the accent on the Forbes – is a small, developing company. I don't know what on earth Verolde can want with it – any more than I can guess why he's down here apparently casting a musical – but I'm certain we can improve on the price if we wait a few years."

"There's a squeeze on the banks and we're held up for development money. We may not get it until it's too late."

"That's a chance I think we should take, John."

"And if I thought that I wouldn't be selling."

"I'm sorry; I'm not interested."

"That won't stop Verolde."

"You can stop him, though."

Forbes' thin smile spoke volumes. "The terms are extremely favourable and I've no intention of stopping him."

"Then I'll have to talk to the lawyer."

"Mike Gunter? – you're joking! Do you happen to recall how difficult it always was to get you to sign a legal document?"

"You should have tried harder."

"I had to fly down half the playbeaches of the Riviera even to get you to autograph an export contract. Isn't that trying hard enough?"

Peter watched abstractly as Stan wound the takeup spool a few turns by hand, signalling ponderously for silence. Forbes armed Peter further away from the scene and they continued in the little lobby. Peter said: "I see. And is this how they teach you to do business at Eton?"

"Oh, that chip! Did you really imagine I wanted to go on forever with a one-horse shay?"

"It's just I don't much care for your new choice of stable. Who is Verolde, anyway?"

Forbes said cynically: "He is the philanthropist behind this venture."

"To what purpose? – Art for art's sake?"

"Peter, you're out of your depth. Like the maestro. But at least he knows it. He's got lots of toys to play with and knowing his own level he accepts the position."

"Well, let's hope you're not biting off more than you can chew, either. Money for money's sake can also be misleading."

"It's funny," said John dispassionately, "I never realized you were such a terrible prude. You've even got a fixation about money. You're afraid of it and because of that you'll never have any. But despite your superstitions about big business I give you my word that there's no evil in money if it's properly used."

"In what way does Verolde properly use it?"

"He manufactures teaching machines."

"I wouldn't have thought he was obsessed by the educational needs of the kiddies."

"He doesn't have to be. He has an international company that grossed nearly three million last year."

"He didn't do that out of teaching machines."

Forbes smiled without looking at him. "Well, there *are* other interests. Ask Sedgewick – or aren't you on asking terms these days?"

"Sedgewick? – of TRAX Computers? Well, Verolde isn't on the Board."

"God, you are a baby when it comes to business!"

"Are you saying Verolde is connected with TRAX?"

As Stan pressed the playback button for the tape, Forbes' spectacles lined up face-on with Peter and the magnified eyes mocked him. "So many *questions*, Peter!" The music bleeped again from the twin honk-boxes and Forbes crossed to join Verolde.

Peter, who felt he hadn't exactly excelled during the long series of snubs levelled his way, went outside and wondered whether the girl would follow.

It was getting dark, and the nearest of the three crumbling engine houses was a grim totem to Cornwall's brief industrial boom. Set back from the surviving cottages, its broken chimney cut the skyline in half with rude, phallic suddenness. Beyond it was the sea. You could spot a flashing lighthouse through windows roughly cut in the stonemasonry.

Peter went to the car, lit a cigarette, and waited.

The girl came out after a minute or two. She was carrying a bucket of refuse, swinging the cottage door open and then shut so that the Musiconics swelled and receded, disturbing the clean, evening air and then letting go again.

When she reached the car Peter said: "How did you get mixed up in this?"

"I think you're taking a hell of a lot for granted." But she added: "Mixed up in what, anyway? Or do you imagine we all live on a staple diet of LSD?" Yet she looked anxious all the same, as if a good deal depended on his answer.

"No. And that so-called music isn't psychedelic. It sounds too much like hard work. I admit I give the drug people a wide berth; but something about that crowd scares me a lot more. It scares you too – otherwise you wouldn't have come out."

She said quickly: "I came out to advise you to leave us alone."

"Why?"

"Perhaps I find your attentions unwelcome."

"In that case you're capable of remarkably quick decisions. I don't normally inspire distrust at such short notice."

"I don't mistrust you as a *person*. But you seem to have declared war on us."

"That's because I object to some of the military regulations. Why the hell can't you wear a dress? – or is that against regimental orders?"

She sinewed her bottom tight as if she were on parade. "You object to the rules because they don't suit you! May I have a cigarette?"

"You shouldn't smoke on parade."

"Well, you certainly enjoy giving the orders!" She shot him a buoyant little smile, as if to give him an opportunity to stand at.

He took it. "It's simply" – lighting it for her – "that you have just about the most adorable skin I've ever longed to touch. So why spoil it?"

The complexion referred to heightened a fraction. "You barnstorm very neatly, but does that give you the right to annoy my friends?"

"Why don't we stop fencing?" he suggested, wondering how lips could look so marvellous. "You came out here because you liked me. You may find me brash; but then something pretty brash is needed to compete with . . ." He gestured towards the cottage, ". . . that! There's power in that music. It may be ugly and inhuman, but it seems to express something genuine which you personally are trying to fight."

"That's my problem."

"What if you can't solve it alone?"

"Then I'll ask someone's help."

"Why not mine? Why not pack a lunchbox tomorrow? We could meet on the hill." He pointed eastward. "Up there, for instance, by the far tower. The one at the top of the farm track."

She considered this and said with elaborate nonchalance: "But why should I want to?"

"Don't you?"

"I don't know." She looked suddenly cunning. "You didn't handle John very well. What makes you think you can handle me?"

"That's hardly the same thing. Would you want me to be able to deal with ruthless people ruthlessly? If so, I agree you don't need me. You need them."

"I don't know what I need."

"I think you need me to dust the mud from the seat of your jeans. It might stop you trying to get everything both ways."

She flared: "As president of the Peter Shackleton fan club, don't you ever find your approach rather boorish?"

"At least you're capable of being angry."

"Even that sounds contrived." She turned to go. "Perhaps I'm interested in Musiconics because it isn't so predictable."

"I think you rather like things to be 'predictable' but you're too scared of them to admit it."

She hesitated. "Why should I be scared?"

"I don't know yet. But if you let your hair down and let me buy you a dress tomorrow you might find out you don't have to be . . . Or are you going to let them turn you into something else?"

She looked at him with a sudden, quick movement, then back towards the cottage. From the window came a weird, spine-tingling passage like crystal glass.

Peter said gently: "You're in a jam. I don't know what sort. But we both know you are. Didn't you realize?"

She spoke with honesty. "Not till you came."

"Can you get away tomorrow?"

"They might not let me."

"It was you they didn't want me to meet, wasn't it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

She looked away. "Something about . . . personality groups. Yours conflicts with . . ." She broke off, stared at him.

"Yes?" Peter caught her arm, pulled her closer. "Conflicts with what?"

She knew he adored her. "I . . . don't know." Eyes locked; the exact antithesis of Verolde's eyes. She went on: "I think I could drive into Penzance. I could do their shopping."

He said quickly: "Could you meet me at Smith's – W. H. Smith's, the booksellers?"

"What time?"

"Eleven?"

"Okay."

Peter said: "Please believe me when I say what I'm going to do now is in no way contrived."

After he'd kissed her she said: "I know that for certain."

Chapter Two

JIMMY and Daphne, who run the Gurnard's Head Hotel, will tell you a great many local yarns about Ding Dong but it's not easy to get them to talk about that cottage, up there by the old tin mine, or what goes on in it.

The Gurnard's Head is a country pub that stands at the hook of the main road to Land's End; and here a brisk wind funnels around from the headland and catches in the creaky old inn sign, whose squeaky-hinge signature-tune mingles mournfully with the sibilant swash of the tidal spray.

You'll find exactly the same people in the oak bar now as Peter did that evening. There's Dan, a Canadian with a longstanding taste for gunrunning and antiques – a mixture that sounds improbable till you meet him. His wife, Sonia, is a sculptress who looks as if she herself has been fashioned from clay. And though the atmosphere will be bawdy, you will soon gather that the bawdiness is for your benefit . . . you are meant to feel that you have entered a tough little world of spirit; and if you are wise you will take this in good heart. If you do, you will, with absolute certainty, enjoy your evening . . . even if Cornwall isn't quite as earthy as the conversation implies. But on the cottage business they won't be forthcoming . . .

Jimmy hoiked a great tankard of ale on to the counter and pushed it across to Peter. "I should leave 'em alone."

Dan swilled beer-dregs around in his mug, then glared pointedly at Peter, who had it refilled. "Good boy . . .! Yeah, stay away from it is right . . . *Musiconics* . . .! Christ! I've heard it!" He gave Peter a friendly punch. "But I suppose you're thinking of that girl, you randy bastard."

"Do you know her?"

"She's mixed up. Isn't she, Sonia?"

"Whereas you, of course, are the best adjusted nut this side of Colney Hatch."

He gave Sonia a punch this time. "I'll beat you up if you talk like that."

Sonia glared at him contemptuously, then to Peter: "He'll beat me up . . .! Big deal. There isn't a pub between Zennor and Porthcurno where I haven't dragged him home, sobbing drunk, from the floor."

"It's true!" said Dan appreciatively. "It's damn true, you know! She damn well picks me up and heaves me into the car and dumps me on the floor . . . and there I lie, sicking it all up till morning."

Jimmy said: "How disgusting," – and stabbed a pickled onion out of the jar. "I think Mr Shackleton would prefer to hear about the girl."

"Sure! Sure he would . . . What's yer name?"

"Peter."

"You been up there? You went up today, didn't you . . .? You think they play that crazy music for fun, Peter? Listen, I know something about this man Verolde. I'm a much travelled man, you see . . ."

Sonia said: "Almighty God . . .! Not that line, *please*!" She swivelled round to Peter. "Christopher Columbus here once got lost in a Thames barge between Putney Bridge and Battersea."

"It was in a fog . . . There I was, trembling from exposure on the deck house, peering unseeingly into never-ending swirls of impenetrable —"

She hit him; and just to oblige he doubled from pain.

Tiredly, Jimmy said: "Do stick to the point, you two."

Dan stopped playing abruptly. "You want to watch yourself before you get mixed up with those weirdies, Peter . . . I did meet this Verolde once . . ."

Sonia nodded vigorously into her glass. "He did. Really he did."

"He was looking for a place down here . . . It was before he finally found that cottage. He came to our place and asked if it was for sale."

Sonia growled with mirth. "Our place! You should see it! Why anyone should want to buy it!"

" –Hell, he buys things . . ." a fingersnap ". . . just like that. He doesn't know why, or anything. He just buys 'em. And this girl of yours . . . she was with him, see. Not that there was anything between them . . . well, you can always tell. I don't think he was interested, either. Not in that way."

Impatiently, Sonia nagged: "Go on about the electricity bit."

"Oh, yes. Well, he was all interested in the property until I happened to mention that we had our own lighting plant . . . A lot of us make our own electricity down here."

"Yes . . .? Go on."

"You're darn right I'll go on!" He looked suddenly enraged. "You think I'm making this up, don't you?"

Peter didn't, but he was beginning to wonder whether it was humanly possible for the man to stick to the point. So, grinning, he said: "Come on. Do let's have it!"

"Sure. It was like this, see. The moment Verolde realized we had our own generator he went sort of . . . well, I dunno. Just sort of *weird*. I can't explain it very well; except he acted rather like a drug addict who'd been told there was no more heroin. You know what I mean . . .? Now, I can understand someone thinking it a bit inconvenient not to be on the main supply. But how on earth can you be *addicted* to it?"

Forbes felt Verolde's eyes on him as he watched the last of the tail lights disappearing up the old cart track. Then Verolde heaved himself into an armchair, fiddled with a dangling end of magnetic tape. "What chews me up," he said, "is that your dinosaur friend comes tearing down here. Couldn't you have stopped that?"

"We should have consulted him over your interest in the company. Peter – being Peter – would be bound to react. We should have seen that. The net result of your move – far from neutralizing him – has been to bring him into contact with the Subject. I told you it was a damaging scheme and we should have got a checkback on it before acting."

Verolde ripped the end of the tape off angrily. "I'm used to making a few decisions of my own."

"Even if they're wrong?"

"It isn't necessarily wrong. We'll have to take action, I agree. But you can't foresee everything."

"I have a feeling that there'll be all sorts of complications if we allow this to go on, Verolde."

The other man got up. "It can't be that important. The girl wants to go along with us – she said so. There's no harm in what we're doing and it's perfectly legal . . . all of it. So if Peter Pan interferes —"

" –What we did just wasn't fair."

"Shackleton is retrograde. He's an ancient Briton rushing around in woad. It may impress the ladies but it doesn't help us. Your Mr Shackleton belongs in the jungle; and if he's allowed to come back out of it we'll all get tangled up in the undergrowth."

Forbes crossed the room, switched off the amplifiers one by one. "Can't we just tell him?"

"What's the use? He's got some bee in his bonnet about technology and finds it impossible to accept progress. There's too much at stake to allow a moron like that to play with his bow and arrow at everyone else's expense and he's not going to listen to me asking him politely to put his weapon in the museum where it belongs."

"So what will you do?"

Verolde got up to go. "I'll put the problem to the network."

He drove at high speed out of Cornwall; and stopping once at Mere for dinner he made excellent progress to the headquarters of TRAX Computers in Victoria. The night porter admitted him just before two a.m. and after a brief exchange handed him the key to the office door whose plastic sign was marked *C. H. Sedgewick.* The escalator which normally ran from the metallic-looking foyer to the mezzanine was inoperative at this time of night but the lifts, which began the ascent from this upper level, were in operation. Verolde took the centre one; and pressing the button for the sixth floor, examined himself in the big mirror at the back.

Reassured, he stepped into the soundproofed corridor, which led via the central typing pool to Sedgewick's office and the sliding doors beyond that. These gave access to a small room containing what has come to be known as an Informator Console. All it amounts to is a remote control-point connected to a computer system, and is nothing new.

In this case the console was also connected to a local "slave"

computer which had a subsidiary role in a main scheme. Near by was an apparatus in a glass-fronted cabinet which Verolde nicknamed a "jump-tape". Properly called a *Servo*, it conformed to the invented slang appropriately enough.

You've seen them, of course. They look like – and actually are – tape recorders; but they are so made that the two spools may be started and stopped very rapidly, without breaking the tape.

The jump-tape in Sedgewick's office was activated now, as Verolde dialled up an Asking Channel. With a feverish series of jerks, the jump-tape racked its memory – running first forward, then backward, then on forward again. After this neurotic performance it finally found what it was hunting for; and by way of reward, a light came on over the teleprinter, which in effect was a means of communicating to and from the computer.

The single sentence which rapidly appeared on the paper roll would have looked, to the uninitiated, unpleasantly like a command. To Verolde, however, it was merely the result of a computation and the relevant details had already been programmed some days before with a crumpled punch-card Verolde had brought back from America this last trip.

So in precision block-capitals the written answer appeared. It said:

BREAK CIRCUIT BETWEEN PETER SHACKLETON/CHRISTINA TEUSON

You can ask Jimmy . . . the area around Gurnard's Head – on the North coast it is – can be spooky enough, all right, for a nightmare. Often in the fall the wind rises high at night, bending stark trees and whistling through and around the chimneys of the old pub and playing a noisy game of swing-boats with the inn sign. Occasionally a dog barks in the distance; but aside from that there is no audible indication of life. If a nightmare is going to happen anywhere at all it has everything in its favour in such a setting.

Peter's dream concerned Verolde, whose eyes came out of the night, seeming fluorescent, like the face of a cathode ray tube. In the dream the features of this anciently-papered hotel room seemed to combine with the cottage up at Ding Dong and many of the disciples, as dim figures, were there. Instead of the music there was merely the electrical hum of computers; and instead of

all that expensive sound equipment there was a complicated array of dials and buttons, and the glass-encased jump-tapes near by.

Christina, he knew, was somehow there, though he couldn't see her. But the equipment racks and the indicator lights and the jump-tapes seemed to have taken on the rich colour of her heightened complexion.

Suddenly John Forbes loomed up, vivid and sharp. He was laughing harshly and pointing at Verolde, who turned slowly around and glared with those electronic eyes, which now seemed to flash as if synchronized with the sudden snatches of movement made by the jump-tapes. They jerked, and with them the blink in his eyes marked the moment.

Suddenly Peter himself realized what John Forbes was pointing at. There was a kind of umbilical cord which joined the back of Verolde's head to a plug connector on the computer racks.

In the dream, Peter lunged forward to disconnect it. But he was too late. The delicate pinkness of the machinery disappeared, as if dying, leaving only the glow from the instrument lights. And just as Peter had his hand on the connector there was a tremendous scream. It came from nowhere; but Verolde's hands, cupped in a powerfully murderous configuration, reached out for Peter's neck and everything went black except those electronic eyes.

Peter awoke, shaking and damp with sweat, to find faint moonlight catching in the metalwork of the washbasin.

There was, however, nothing remotely sinister about Penzance on the sunlit autumn morning next day. Bookshops are for browsing; and to some, the smell of fresh printers' ink is a rare aroma. Connoisseurs of this were filling an idle moment sorting through the new novels and nodding to each other through the racks, smiling as eye met eye. Peter found Christina in the art-book section and she gave a quick, recognition-signal of a smile.

He said: "Sorry about last night."

The girl picked up a book and put it down again. She held her expression deliberately as if concealing amusement. "Why?"

"I think I was being a bull in a china shop, but in the time available it was the only way to make my point."

"Well, you certainly did that!"

"To be honest, I didn't think you'd come."

"To be honest, I didn't think I would either. But I'm hoping you won't put me through another cross-examination and on that basis, well, here I am!"

Peter led the way out towards where he had parked the car. He held the door open for her on the kerbside, and Christina was just about to get in when she hesitated suddenly, as if noticing something. She seemed about to comment but changed her mind and climbed in.

Peter shut the door and looked around in the direction of her glance. There were half a dozen or so of the usual kind of shoppers, typical of a country town out of holiday season, but one man stood out a mile. Peter was sure this tall, lank character with a small but untidy moustache was the reason for Christina's startled reaction. But by now the man was looking pointedly away from them, finally crossing the street and entering the bank, as on an impulse. He was a very bad actor, Peter thought.

"There seem," said Peter tentatively as he started the engine, "to be an awful lot of people interested in you."

"Oh, you saw him."

"I've never seen anyone trying to look inconspicuous with so little success. Who is he?"

"Richard Stranger."

Peter revved the engine a few times. "Friend of yours?"

"Used to be . . . He also used to be John's house-tutor at Eton."

"We're a long way from Eton. And he doesn't look like a candidate for Musiconics."

"No," she said thoughtfully, "you're quite right – he isn't. Look . . . I thought you weren't going to ask questions?"

Peter grinned, and milled the gearbox noisily. "I didn't say that – you did."

"And I meant it."

"Oh, did you? I got the impression you mean two different things in pretty well everything you say."

"Now I've made you angry."

"Well, we can't park here all day. Where are we going?"

"I thought you were going to take me to that gruesome mine?"

"Not if you don't like it."

Suddenly she said, pseudo-brightly: "Porthcurno. Can you take me to Porthcurno?"

"Yes. Why there?"

"Do you want a reason for everything?"

"It was the way you said it."

"I want to go there, because it's pretty, and because there's a bay, and because there's a pathway up through the hillside, which you'll like. Okay?"

"Okay!" He didn't think these were the only reasons, though. "How do we get there?"

"Follow the signs for Land's End. I'll show you where to turn off."

He sat, tensely silent, as he drove. They neither of them spoke till the turn-off.

Finally she said: "Peter, stop manufacturing silence in the hope of getting your own way!"

"If you won't tell me anything about yourself, how can we communicate?"

"You could talk about you."

"You know about me. I'm merely a bloke who's just got ditched by his partner in business."

She nodded. "John told me. But surely you'll make plenty out of it?"

He looked at her hard, really angry now.. "Do you think that's the only thing that counts? – I may not have gone to Eton to acquire John's kind of aloofness but I do have my own standards to maintain. It seems to me that Etonians pursue an ethical code which only applies to other Etonians. As long as they see each other right it doesn't matter who they tread on in the process."

She said immediately: "If you think that I'd better tell you that Richard Stranger loathes everything John stands for."

"Surely not sufficiently to bring him all the way down here? Or does he feel the same way about Musiconics as I do?"

She said carefully: "I don't really know how you do feel."

"I tried to explain. I think there's something unhealthy about it."

She laughed. "That sounds like sheer superstition!"

"Is it superstition in this man Richard Stranger's case? – He must be down here for a reason . . . so perhaps he knows something I don't. All I know is that the Musiconics crowd have persuaded

John to sell out to Verolde over my head. That's sinister enough to go on with."

"Why blame Musiconics for that?"

"Intuition."

"No, Peter. Superstition!"

"Oh, yes, I know the arguments well enough. These days people want everything proved in black and white . . . the way computers want it. But fortunately every animal has a built-in ability to sniff out danger. I'm an animal – not a computer."

They drank countryside for a while – fields from which the brush had been burned off, so as to form a stark black background for white-winged gulls; cob-walled cottages with weather-beaten thatch like parcels half undone; and now, the sniff in the air of a sea breeze as they turned for the headland.

She said: "Why the frown?"

"I was wondering if you met John through Richard Stranger."

"Yes."

"Then why are you avoiding Stranger now?"

"Because I'm a friend of John's. He and John don't exactly love each other."

"How much of a friend of John's are you?"

"I'm not his bird . . . I told you that before."

"Does Stranger approve of Musiconics?"

She looked at him. It was a warning. "No . . . he doesn't."

"Then I badly want to meet him."

"If you go on as you are, you almost certainly will. But it might force you . . . to choose between two worlds, Peter."

"Do you mean between your world and his?"

"Do we have to bring it right down to personalities?"

"Christina, I want you."

She looked straight through the windscreen and said: "I know that."

They drove, in silence, down the hill into all the neatness of Porthcurno's only street.

"That's funny," said Peter.

She looked at him with particular intensity. "Why?"

"The headquarters of *Cable and Wireless*."

She said flatly: "This is where some of the transatlantic cables go under the sea. What's funny about that?"

He slowed the car down and lit a cigarette. "Only that we can't seem to be able to get away from electronics."

She said nothing.

There was something prim and elderly about this place. To the right, two or three neatly-kept buildings – apparently converted from something else – lined the road with a great air of hygiene and respectability, and even the creeper had a military haircut. There was one long, white building the whole of which looked as if it had been scrubbed that morning. "It's where they train the company engineers," Christina explained.

On the left, beyond the car parks and tennis courts, clean as billiard tables and almost as flat, rose other buildings also belonging to the company.

Peter said: "I thought this was a seaside resort."

"It is, further down."

He swung on to the car park. "They must have to watch the kids with the buckets and spades . . . or everything would be coming up cables!" – and again that funny glance from her, almost as if on some deep level she was aiming to have him think on these lines. It seemed to suggest a possible reason why she chose the place.

But she said gaily: "Come on! Let's go on the beach. We won't risk digging sandcastles but I can show you the path up the cliff."

They walked through a gulley and then came to a steep downward incline over smooth rocks to the little bay. Prodded deep in the sand near the top of the incline was a metal spike, and at the top of this was a flat piece of iron, diamond-shaped. "It's a cable marker," said the girl.

"You know a lot about this place."

"It's quite simple really. It's got it written on the front!"

They went the other side of it. Fading letters on rusting metal: *Telegraph Cables*.

"Simple," said the girl, and ran/slid/ran down the sand to the bay.

Peter watched her go on ahead.

There, in the bow-shape of the lagoon, the sun penetrated diffused cloud and hazed in dazzling brilliance on to miniature waves, which lapped the beach and spumed against rocks in sudden mirror-bright splashes.

From here the two of them climbed up the twig-cracking path that was cut into the cliff face over on the right. Sometimes small steps were sliced out of the rock, then it would become a path again. All the time they were about twenty yards apart, the girl leading.

Eventually she stopped, called something, waited for Peter to catch her up, then pointed to the headland on the opposite side of the bay. "Look there!" she commanded.

It was like a curious game of "Touch", to which had been added an element of mystique. For what she was pointing at was a second cable-marker, erected high on the opposite side of the bay, protruding way up on the cliff. With each point made, Christina checked his response, as if to assure herself that the treasure hunt was leading where she wanted it. And yet all the time it was compulsive, like following an animal instinct which ran directly against the secretive side of her nature.

The rest of their walk was all like that: the girl slightly ahead – not remote from Peter despite the twenty yards interval between them – and leading, now down the footpath to the first cable marker, now up the opposite cliff, which was much steeper and more difficult to climb. Minute to minute, as she stood momentarily on some skyline in patterned silhouette, Peter felt each successive pang of wanting – wanting to hold her, wanting to kissbite to the point of some basic sexual revenge . . . the breathless need for bodily equalization and the flow towards entropy which is the universal law.

But there was something else, too, in this pursuit . . . Some answer, perhaps, to his questions? – not in words she was too afraid to say, but in a totally untethered instinct to show a potential mate where lay the danger-scent?

They came near to the topmost cable marker now, where the the wind tore audibly at the tin diamond-shaped legend board, rattling it, worrying it, as if it were a constant source of annoyance. The girl ran the last few yards, then clutched on to it, panting. She didn't look at Peter, but gazed further along the coastline, where there was another small bay. "You can't reach that one from the road, Peter. We have to go on climbing round."

"Can you manage it?"

"It's not difficult."

It was though. The girl was agile, but the ground was soft and skiddy between the rocks. Once she nearly fell. Peter caught her, that time. "Be careful."

She took no notice, but stood up on a rock, looking down into the new bay. She seemed to be working something out in her mind, as if remembering what she'd done once before. Peter tried to say something. She cut him short. "I've got to count sixty paces. That brings us to one of those gaps in the rock. We have to hit the right gap. You'll see why soon."

And a little way down the gap, he did.

There was no marker; but there was an exposed length of cable, just visible before it lunged back at either end into the ground under their feet. She turned and looked at him, and he raised his eyebrows and said: "Well? Hadn't you better explain all this?"

She shook her head and looked frightened again, like the previous day. "I can't. Except no one knows about it."

"Doesn't it belong to *Cable and Wireless*?"

"No."

He watched her – indeed he couldn't take his eyes off her – while overhead a helicopter fussed about noisily in and around the sawtooth lagoons that serrated the coastline. In her face, that indefinable mark of the inner fight of someone accident-prone to tragedy. She had only to commit herself emotionally to discover things about herself she would far rather not know.

As she gazed up at the helicopter, which tilted now in a banking turn round the Point, her generously thick hair, cut quite short but springy and strong in depth, was brushed by the wind and flicked against the high tension of youthfulness. Fluttering hair left one ear free for fiercely tender attack but not yet, not for seconds. For with face tilted, keen-eyed, watchful, she traced the progress of the helicopter and stood there lithe with one sandal tensed up on the rock.

The last echo of the noisy slipstream boomed round the bay and was chopped off with sharp suddenness and a gull or two returned. With sad lament they expressed their own acceptance of the commonplace; one more mating among the trillions was taking place.

To them, as to the statisticians, it was merely the whole of life.

Chapter Three

THE red helicopter which blazened strident military markings almost slammed itself down on to the tarmac. The tyres hit the dust while radios squawked and waiting American personnel squinted across as the sun dazzled them from the metalwork of the fuselage. This was NATO Headquarters, St Ives; and to prove it a jeep with that much written on it tore across concrete to succour the chopper, which was squashing itself down on to its groaning oleos, rocking and lurching as the rotor blades still windmilled soggily overhead.

General Cleve Trefathick, Chief Liaison Staff Officer of the United States Air Force, flipped open the door of the plastic bubble and visored his sungoggles up to his brow as he jumped down. He accepted salutes from groundcrew with a loose backhand volley and eased his weight into the jeep while it was still moving, thereafter to be whisked across to his office in the flat concrete slab overlooking the Cornish coast.

In there he flung his goggles at the only comfortable chair on which lay an untidy muddle of Perspex-covered maps and the usual quota of captured binoculars, marching-compasses, and leather belts which comprised tokens of tropical wars. His secretary entered as he sat down at his desk; but in reply to her flat-toned greeting from Flatbush, Brooklyn, he just grimaced over the top of the coffee carton that had been placed there for him and informed her that it tasted like the sludge in the bottom of a damn crankcase. She left to get some fresh; and Trefathick, selecting a key from his ring, crossed to a sliding door which gave access to an informator console. At the keyboard of this, Trefathick proceeded to open a conversation with Central Military Computing, an installation put in by TRAX.

The typed-out text of this keyboard conversation was as follows:

TFK to CMC: REF TRANSOCEANIC CABLE 47X REPORT

CMC to TFK: NOT KNOWN AT CMC

TFK to CMC: WHO PROVIDES TRANSOCEANIC LINK PORTHCURNO TO WASHINGTON CENTRAL?

CMC to TFK: WAIT

The General lit a cigar and did so.

But he had already received his first surprise. To check the extent of this he opened a filing cabinet and drew out a folder containing a communications diagram. This clearly showed Transoceanic Cable 47X as being of military origin. Yet CMC had declared, over a top-secret teleprinter link, that as far as they were concerned it didn't exist.

The teleprinter clacked into action again.

CMC to TFK: WILL YOU TALK DIRECT COMMUNICATIONS CONTROL?

It was Trefathick's turn to tap out the word WAIT. And after checking the diagram before him he frowned angrily and hit the teleprinter keys with some force. This was not, of course, felt at the other end; but the phrasing made up for it.

TFK to CMC: WHO THE HELL IS COMMUNICATIONS CONTROL? NO RECORD HERE RPT IDENTIFICATION CODE OF CABLE AS 47X TAKE YOUR FINGER OUT

Impassively came the reply:

CMC to TFK: CONNECTING YOU DIRECT WITH COMMUNICATIONS CONTROL STANDBY . . .

The General was definitely starting to fume.

COMNS CON to TFK: QUERY IS 47X MARKED IN DOTTED LINES?

TFK to COMNS CON: YOU HAVE DIAGRAM LOOK AT IT

COMNS CON to TFK: NEGATIVE STATE WHETHER 47X MARKED DOTTED LINES

TFK to COMNS CON: YES WHO ARE YOU ANYWAY? COMNS CON NOT ENTERED ON REGISTER

COMNS CON to TFK: NO AUTHORITY REVEAL LOCATION NO AUTHORITY GIVE DETAILS 47X

TFK to COMNS CON: WE WILL SEE ABOUT THAT ARE YOU AWARE THIS CABLE PARTLY EXPOSED AND LOCATION KNOWN TO INTRUDERS?

COMNS CON to TFK: STATE IDENTITY INTRUDERS

TFK to COMNS CON: MAN AND GIRL BELIEVED ORIGINATING DING DONG

COMNS CON to TFK: DING WHAT?

TFK to COMNS CON: DONG

COMNS CON to TFK: WAIT

Trefathick's secretary knocked on the partition door. "Shall I leave your coffee through in the office, sir?"

"Miss Murchison, on no account are you to disturb me in here. Is that understood?"

"I only —"

"– 'Only' is too much. Yes, dammit, leave it out there. And tell the signal officer I want to see him immediately."

"Yes, General."

"And tell the pilot my helicopter is to remain on standby. I shall want to fly back along the coast in a few minutes."

"Yes, General."

"And whatever you do, do *not* come in here again. Ever. Under any conceivable circumstance. Not even if the building is burning down. Not even if the Martians come. Clear?"

"Yes, General."

The General turned back to the printer as it clattered into further action.

COMNS CON to TFK: QUERY NUMBER OF CAR IN WHICH INTRUDERS ARRIVED PORTHCURNO

TFK to COMNS CON: GLR 505C MINI

It was then that the printer seemed to go clear off its head. For it suddenly wrote:

BREAK CIRCUIT BETWEEN PETER SHACKLETON/CHRISTINA TEUSON

The odd manner in which Christina seemed to be pulled in two different ways showed when she appeared inexplicably anxious to return to Penzance. "After all, darling," she said to Peter as they descended from the cliffs towards the car, "you *did* say you'd buy me a dress."

He patted her bottom and said, "Avaricious beast!" but watched her thoughtfully as she went on ahead. He felt it wasn't only the dress that was on her mind.

In Penzance it began all right.

"The skirt's not short enough," he said.

Christina chucked him a look, then inspected herself appreciatively in the shop mirror. She knew she looked marvellous. "They've already taken it up two inches!"

"What's wrong with another two?"

"Take your mind off my legs and let's go and have that coffee."

"I can't possibly take my mind off them. I suffer from lack of concentration. I think it's because of the backs of your knees."

"That settles it. I shall do nothing further to this micro-mini-skirt to upset your concentration any further . . . Anyway, darling, it's a lovely dress so thank you very much. But *do* let's go for that coffee."

"Is it such a desperate mission?"

She said quickly: "I promised we'd meet John."

"John! Why on earth?"

"Well, don't look so shattered!"

"Let's forget it. See him another time."

"Darling . . . I *promised*."

"But *why*? Did you tell him you were meeting me?"

"He . . . saw us talking outside last night."

Peter couldn't tell if she was lying or not. "So?"

"He guessed we'd meet and this was more or less the only way I could get away with it. *Please* don't let's fight about it, darling."

"Well, will it be for long?"

"No . . . I promise."

John was already in the coffee bar, talking on the telephone. He looked rattled and angry. Slamming the phone back on the hook he indicated a table where he'd chucked his jacket. There was also a cine camera – a very expensive-looking Bolex – hanging from a strap on the chair-back.

John looked from one to the other as they all sat down.

He said: "Peter, I did try and warn you to avoid this."

"This?" It seemed somehow a ridiculous word.

John distributed his gaze between the two of them as he said: "That cable you're so fascinated about happens to be part of a highly secret project."

"Then isn't it rather careless of them to leave it lying around? How did you know about it anyway . . .? Oh, I get it: the helicopter. I may be a little dim but what's it got to do with you?"

"I've been asked to restrain you."

"What from and who by? Does Maestro Stan of the Musiconics run a flying circus as well?"

Christina threw him a warning glance. And Peter, incredulous that she thought fit to justify any actions to John Forbes, held her wrist gently and said: "It's not John's business, so don't panic." To John he said: "Are you going to delight us by staying for coffee or must you go?"

Christina said quickly: "Let him stay, Peter."

Forbes smiled. "Christina seems to know more than you do about the way things are run in this world. You ought to be thankful you were spotted before things had got any further."

"Any further than what? John, your delusions of grandeur are taking hold. I've only got to go to the police and report a low flying aircraft for you to realize the way things are run."

Forbes, easily: "I wouldn't advise it."

Peter, to Christina: "Perhaps you believe me now about your dreary Musiconics only being a shopfront for something else."

Forbes roared with laughter at this, and waved cheerfully at the waitress for coffee. "For two, please," he added, "I'm going in a minute . . . Peter, who do you imagine you are? – *Batman*? Verolde happens to be a contractor for NATO among other things. You may know they have a base near here. He amuses himself with our funny noises as comic relief. However, neither he nor the authorities would consider it very comic if you started indignantly spouting to the world about military installations."

Christina didn't laugh, however. Through dry lips she said: "I promise Peter won't say anything about the cable."

When John Forbes replied to this there was unmistakable sadism in those beady eyes behind the lenses. "I hope," he said, "that Peter cares enough about you to remember that."

Peter's voice was brittle, as if he sensed something so sinister in this remark that he couldn't quite believe it. "Christina, if that cranky lot up at Ding Dong have made you think you're suddenly living in a police state I think I can put you straight on that."

John rose to go. "One of you certainly needs straightening out. But Peter, please don't go on behaving like a knight in shining armour when there's nothing to fight except your own cussedness." To Christina, same look: "I take it I'll see you back at the cottage."

She said nothing. She and Peter just sat watching Forbes leave the place.

And Christina said: "Peter, I have a nasty feeling you are soon going to find out quite a lot about 'the way things are run'."

They finished the coffee in a miserable silence.

"Are you really going back to the cottage?"

"I needn't go yet."

"You're still talking as if you really think you're under orders."

"I do work for them."

"Oh, yes – the Verolde Trust! And doesn't friend Stan of the Musiconics know he's being spoofed? I mean, you've only got to ask yourself how a man like Verolde can be a key figure in a defence project – if he really is – and yet play around with progressive bubble-and-squeak of the sort I just heard, to ask yourself what he's really up to." They reached Peter's car. "But of course, the one thing you don't do is to ask yourself anything. Ours not to reason why, and all that."

"What good would it do?"

He opened the car door for her and stared. "You know something? I think you're ill. If you went to a doctor and told him about your daily diet of paradox – and the way you accept it all – I honestly think he'd be seriously worried about you."

She said: "If you feel like that, you could always leave me alone."

He pressed the starter. "Isn't it funny! You wait until you're tucked into the car and then come up with a thing like that." He slammed the car savagely into gear and headed out of town, taking the Zennor road. "I want you desperately. If that's what you want me to say I'm quite happy to say it. But not on these terms."

"Peter, I haven't made any terms. It's you who makes terms."

"We disagree. You blindly take orders from a man who wishes to cheat me in business."

"But he's not. He's making a decision which you can't reverse. That may be ruthless but it's not fraud."

"But *why*? What possible use can Forbes–Shackleton be to a man like Verolde?"

The plea in her eyes was genuine. "Peter? Let it rest there . . . for the moment. Please?"

"But supposing I fall in love with you? Supposing I am already? What chance do I have if half your personality is mixed up

in something I can't possibly understand and which seems actively hostile to me?"

She said gently: "Darling . . . aren't you actively hostile to *them*?"

"Answer me this: Why did you show me that cable, anyway? Why did you bother to take me there, if there's nothing to fight?" He glanced across, studying her face. "You can't answer me, can you? That's the extraordinary thing! And now that cunning look, again. *Why?*"

"You're imagining things."

"That may fool you but it doesn't fool me."

"I'm sorry."

"God, but you frighten me!"

Innocent voice: "Why?"

"Because if I were in my right senses I'd cut and run. Right now."

"Are you going to?"

"Naturally not. People don't."

"I would have hated it if you had. Do you believe me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then take me to your tower."

"Why?"

"Well, darling, it *was* your suggestion!"

"But you didn't want to go, and now you do."

"If you're suspicious of absolutely everything —"

"Do you wonder? What about the appointment with John?"

"I had to do that."

"Yes. You *had* to do it. Why don't you ask yourself if anything you do is really voluntary? You might get a rather surprising answer."

"I don't think I want to know the answer, Peter."

"That – at least – I believe."

Peter thought: God she looks frightened and I love her and this is going to end in disaster and why don't I stop the car and ditch her right now?

And that tower is damn close to the cottage up at Ding Dong and she's odd every time I mention it and I can feel that I'm walking straight into a trap.

I think half of her wants to see me do it and the other half

desperately wants to warn me but the trouble is the first half is winning because my God how I want her!

And yet, what can these people really *do*? They've been intimidating her up to a point for some weird reason, but surely I can influence her away from that, given time . . .

·She was saying: "What are you thinking?"

And from his own answer he realized how hopelessly hooked he was. "I was hoping that there isn't anyone around when we reach the tower."

She held his hand warmly, squeezing it. "It's not very appropriate to you," she said.

"Why not?"

"It's got a broken chimney!"

He led the way into the place.

She said: "It's grim. Like a tomb."

"No. You've got to use your imagination. You've got to imagine what it was like when the mines were in operation." He pointed upward. "Ever seen a beam engine? There's one in the Science Museum. High overhead, there's a sort of seesaw, with huge balancing weights on either end." He indicated the head of the shaft, over which was bolted a metal flange. "That's the shaft that leads down to the labyrinth below ground. The pump must have been used to get rid of stale air."

"And the machine in this weird place creaked and groaned and made money while kids of fourteen did fifteen-hour shifts under the ground?" She shuddered. "It sounds utterly terrible. Please let's go. Can't we?"

But he didn't think it was only the line of thought that was upsetting her. For he was following her eyes. They kept darting down to the head of the shaft, then tearing themselves away from it, as if afraid Peter might spot what she was really staring at.

Lying on top of the metal plate were Coke bottles and ugly heaps of rubbish left over from picnics. Peter climbed down and started kicking them out of the way. He looked up at her halfway through this task. She stood absolutely still – a space-age Venus framed against the narrow window of the ruin.

Then he stooped down and smeared one of the bolts with his finger.

It came up wet with oil. And he demanded harshly. "What's down there, Christina? What do you keep trying to tell me? – only to retract when it comes to the point?"

It was the first time she'd really bared her teeth in overt temper. Her eyes blazed as she spoke. "I said, let's go!"

Neither of them moved.

He said: "No! You don't really want to! You let me come here and you meant me to come here. All the time you're in two minds. I don't think you can help it, but everything you do has an antidote. I'm trying to listen to the part that you're sealing off . . . the same as that shaft has been sealed off. Recently."

She jumped down suddenly and held on to him with a grip almost painfully tight. She started covering him with kisses and caressing him and whispering things to him. "Peter . . .! Please don't talk. Please don't make me face anything. Not just yet . . . Try and understand. *Please* try and understand!"

But this wasn't a plea for understanding – it was an exhortation to escape, and he took it. For when he tore clear that slight skirt and frenetically stripped away her pants the actions were symbolic of a mutual severance from the guidelines which were the unseen controls of a hidden society; and as he discharged himself of lust inside her body, assuaged by her willingness to accept it, the two of them were in defiance of those forces which had made it impossible for them to communicate by any means except this one.

As Christina spasmed against him, every sinew tautened to youthful health and innocence, they reached a unity which could only bring torture if in the future it should ever be denied them.

There were limp minutes before the sad other life was resumed; but the implications of coitus, like the phenomenon of persistence of vision, carried them over the next few minutes so that the smile of love did not wane all at once.

So that when Peter dressed himself, he didn't feel the aesthetic objections that sometimes oppress men when the abrupt moment for zipping back the conventional labels of attire underlines the harsh boundary between two worlds. For once the act of doing up flies didn't seem like an apologetic rejection of the female; the lacing of shoes wasn't a curt farewell . . .

". . . But," said Christina, "you're afraid of looking proud. Why, darling?"

He placed a cigarette in her mouth as she lay completely motionless. "It's because I'm scared . . . scared of being overrated by you."

"I know you are." She smiled at him. There wasn't a line on her face – the smile was total. "You want to have the right to fumble; and yet, because you haven't fumbled once, you're afraid of when you do."

"It's because I think I can't hold you." He laid his head on her breasts. "Look how I cling to your nipples . . . needing you too much already."

"You're not nearly as afraid as you think, you know. Frightened men never commit themselves as you do. They keep something back, for pride's sake . . . If I ever hurt you, as a woman, you would punish me and I would accept it."

"But supposing you hurt me as a person?"

"I don't think I quite see what you mean, Peter. I'm not sure I am 'a person' . . . or is that what scares you? If so, the inadequacy is mine, not yours."

"There are things, Christina, that could take you beyond my reach."

"That's true of anyone. But it wouldn't be another man. Not for as long as you loved me – and I do know that you do."

"Supposing I were too shallow? – to make you feel loved?"

"Why are you so afraid of that?"

He sat up and thought about it. "When I was in America, I once told someone —"

" – You told a girl! Admit it!"

"That makes me seem such a ham, somehow . . . All right, I once told a girl that I hated the technological world I found her in. She said – and I remember the mockery on her face as she said it – she said it was because I was afraid, not of computers, but of losing my own identity."

"It's true, Peter. But that doesn't necessarily invalidate your fear. Does it? How can it? – we're all afraid of the same things, basically, and your strength as a lover is that you don't manufacture differences between the two sexes. There are so few that are real; and the accepted ones are just imagined . . . For instance, you wouldn't object if I was an electrical engineer —"

"– as long as you wore a skirt occasionally."

"Yes, darling, I admit that *is* important to you . . .! But I think that could be just a little bit neurotic. Don't you see?"

"You're too clever."

"Of course I am!" She kissed him. "But I'm so relieved that there's at least something sexual you worry about. Men who are a hundred per cent secure belong on the big screen. They stride among the poppies of Technicolor Japan without a sign of passing out. Which shows how little they understand the Japanese . . . Don't be afraid of me in pants, Peter . . . merely because you really love me in them!"

For a while, only the crickets spoke, till Christina talked a little about herself. It seemed to Peter that in this mood her tastes were as far removed from the ugliness of Musiconics as were his. She said that one of her first acquisitions had been an old set of 78s . . . Casals playing Dvorak's 'cello concerto. She'd always loved Cornwall and for some reason she couldn't explain, this famous lyrical theme of the concerto had always reminded her of the beautiful bays at England's most westerly tip. She sang the theme and she had a nice, plain, straightforward voice with no trimmings, naïve like a choirboy's. Peter didn't interrupt her during this, felt ashamed once when he glanced down at that unanswered question beneath their feet – the metal lid of the sealed shaft. She caught him at it but – curiously – only smiled slightly as she continued to hum the tune.

Then, just before the end, came the interruption.

A sudden sharp, shattering noise exploded and funnelled into the engine house, vortexing down the chimney and thundering against the metal plate where Christina was standing. Then almost instantly it was gone.

Peter leapt out through one of the incisions in the granite, shielded his eyes against the glare, and saw nothing. There was only the long grass and the spikey growth of weed and the gorse growing in tufts all over the rise.

Christina came dashing out after him and shouted: "What was it?"

Before Peter could say anything back, the answer was before them.

Seeming unnaturally large, the red-painted helicopter swept straight at them from around the hillock and bent the long grass

low as it sank clumsily into a landing only a few yards from the tower. The slipstream from the rotor-blades caught Christina's hair and dress.

For a moment she stood uncomprehendingly. Their thoughts had been so far away from John Forbes and Musiconics and the unspoken mistrust that had been deliberately neglected – just for a while – that the appearance of the ridiculous machine seemed irrelevant.

But the blades swished to a standstill and the door opened and an American General, wearing goggles, jumped down on to the grass.

For a few moments there was a weird silence as the man covered the intervening yards. During this Peter looked disbelievingly at Christina, who shook her head helplessly. And then Peter said: "I so want to believe you."

Formalities were brief. The General removed the goggles and said: "Trefathick. I'm the General Officer commanding the Liaison Branch to NATO. Are you Mr Shackleton?"

"I am. What do you want?"

"I've come to collect Miss Teuson. She has some friends at Base who want to talk with her."

Peter said incredulously: "*She's* wanted at NATO? Why? What possible business can Miss Teuson have there?"

The General produced what he considered to be a disarming smile. "It's purely a personal matter," he said.

Peter said: "Wait a moment," and turned to Christina. "I very much doubt if the General has authority to land here and I'd have nothing to do with it."

Christina seemed to hesitate. Peter was looking at her questioningly and because of this he didn't notice exactly what happened next. But was that device in the General's hand a thumbnail-sized tee-vee?—a picture with a message?

The instantaneous change in Christina at the moment when the General pushed up his goggles was so complete, so absolute, that there was no reaction in Peter's repertoire which could meet the situation. The emotional jolt had no precedent in Peter's human experience and it left him without the power to act.

In an odd, harsh voice she said to Peter: "This doesn't happen to be any of your business. Naturally I shall go with the General."

So Peter didn't obstruct Christina, who had already started to

move towards the aircraft door. The General placed his goggles carefully back in position, and followed.

For a moment Christina paused on the step-up, turning towards Peter and looking – he thought – really evil. Just as the engine was restarted she shouted: "*Peter, stay away from us!*"

Peter, sickened by tormented emotions, had to fight the bile. But he stood back, and the General smiled tersely once more through the goggles, then turned to board the helicopter.

There was a burst of throttle and the scream of wind catching in the chimney tower.

The great red contraption clumsily raised itself and was away. Peter stood firmly still. He saw that Christina, visible through the glass of the cockpit, stared directly ahead, impassive.

Peter watched the aircraft until it banked away out of sight and sound.

– thinking about the way things are run.

Chapter Four

THE way things are run . . . The phrase haunted Peter and became the key which systematically closed every exit to the insidious trap in which he found himself. The label attached to the key was NATO. Although Peter had not the least doubt that the General was acting without authority the label had its effect. The worst crime ostensibly committed by Trefathick was to pick up a girl in a military aircraft and convey her, of her own free will, to some predetermined destination. Landing the chopper on the downs in protection of military installations would not be challenged – even if consent had not been given in advance, and Trefathick said it was. And wherever Christina was taken on this flip, she was back at Ding Dong the following day.

Woven into the situation was an ugly rumour. Peter first heard it being bandied about in the Gurnard's Head. He walked into the bar and met one of those silences. Drinkers turned around to watch him, then looked away and gathered in groups. He felt like a leper when, finally driven to demanding of a big, burly bloke to say outright what the massive cold-shoulder was all about, he got back a twisted version of his conduct with Christina which was evidently accepted without question by them all.

This large, red-faced gentleman was some sort of company director. He began by bursting out with a statement to the effect that Peter himself was more than lucky that the General interfered when he did. The only reason why charges had not (so far) been preferred against Peter was for the girl's sake.

Peter was trembling with rage and the big man noted the fact, misinterpreting it. "Yes," he said, half to Peter and half for the consumption of the room in general, "you might well be in a state of some considerable agitation about what you've done. If I were you I'd get as far away from this area as possible and leave the girl alone."

It was some time later that Peter heard the full text of the rumour which so outraged the morals of those who didn't see fit to question it. The gist of it was that he was a ruthless seducer who "didn't stop short of committing indecencies all over the Cornish countryside" – as if mutual acts of love, shared in the white heat of a romantic response to nature's things, had been grossly obscene assaults perpetrated by him in the market place. As always with any story containing elements of truth the thing was impossible to deny.

He was able to see Christina several times at the cottage but never alone. She did nothing to alter the impression conveyed by the rumours, maintaining instead an attitude similar to her performance on the occasion of Trefathick's arrival at the tower in the helicopter. Throughout this period, in which Peter became the accused and Christina a witness persuaded by the prosecution by invisible means, Peter sustained a superficial calm he certainly didn't feel. On the last occasion, however, he returned to his hotel and frankly sobbed on the bed. He could not for a moment exclude from his mind the sheer sharp image of Christina's body, still and spent and perfect, in the shade of the secluded rocks of Porthcurno.

After this, he felt driven to return to London because there had been vague hints of involving the police should he "continue to molest her" and he knew instinctively that she would be incapable of protecting him. He didn't understand how she was being manipulated and in any case he was beginning to doubt his own rational processes because his intense agitation, deliberately used against him, was conspicuously affecting his manner. For no good reason he had already rammed the car into one of the crumbly old walls which ran along the roadside, badly damaging the car and nearly leading to a drink charge. The police seemed aware of his movements though nothing was said in the open . . . it was just that every prowl car in that part of Cornwall appeared to line his route wherever he went.

On returning, dejected and disturbed, to London, Peter found that the events of Cornwall were on the lips of most of his colleagues and friends and the same sinister atmosphere prevailed.

This might not have come as such a shock had Peter known the degree to which the Informator Console – familiar enough to him

by a less pretentious name in its rudimentary form – had spread through certain sections of the Communications industry as a tool.

In such matters Peter was technologically far from naïve; and unlike General Trefathick (who actually thought that his teleprinter was connected to one operated by another individual instead of – as was the case – a computer) he had gone to great lengths to educate himself in the more sophisticated applications of electronics, on the assumption that Forbes–Shackleton would develop and thrive.

He knew for instance that at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology – where he had spent a month as a guest of the University – consoles very like those manufactured by TRAX in England had been proposed for installation actually in the homes of the professors, so that they could make use of a central computer without even going out. Apart from the tedious effect of allowing work to intrude on home life the idea had seemed harmless enough at the time . . . though there were other aspects of life at M.I.T. which were less so. And had he known that Verolde was involved with some of the more shattering chicaneries of American technology that had impinged on Peter direct, it would have been possible to guess much more accurately about the concealed significance of the Ding Dong affair.

But the first hint of this link did not reveal itself until Peter read the note left for him by John in the office of Forbes–Shackleton.

"Office" is rather a grand word for the set-up Peter Shackleton had been running with John Forbes in London. There was never anywhere to put the coffee down and the phone bill hadn't always been paid before the line got cut off. The place was one part laboratory and one part workshop; the chaotic overspill near the door was the nearest thing to a filing system; and actually getting down to the paperwork entailed moving partly-wired equipment from chair to desk, then shifting technical broadsheets (not to mention tennis rackets and skiing equipment) from desk to shelf . . . like one of those puzzles in which you can only move one square at a time in order to get a series of them in a certain sequence.

The memo, written in the precision scrawl Forbes had acquired

at Cambridge, accurately reflected the personality; you could see, via that pedantic scribble, the rounded head, the chunk of dark hair protruding over the back of the collar, the inelegant, black-rimmed spectacles that made him look more like an over-intellectual advertising executive than one half of an electronics concern. You could hear through the scrawl the crisp irritating speech and the didactic mannerisms. The note preached down to its recipient, as if Forbes regarded Peter as emotionally retarded but really quite harmless; a spontaneous juvenile capable of having good ideas by mistake. Part of the letter read:

". . . Anyway, if you ever do have the good grace to blow into the office in order to make your free phonecalls, for God's sake do try to get around to signing the attached papers (which have nothing to do with the financial arrangements we have discussed but relate to the computer contract you almost lost us by ignoring a reminder from Sedgewick of TRAX).

"These contracts have been checked by Gunter and Gunter so don't waste everybody's time pretending to read them through. Just sign them.

"I don't suppose there's the remotest use in trying to convince you that George Verolde can do nothing but good in the interests of our company. He has wide technological experience, contracting both for NATO, the space programme and M.I.T., and is quite willing to leave you a seat on the board if you want to continue with an active interest.

"However, your gyrations in Cornwall (and I did try to warn you) hardly helped anyone. Apart from the fact that Christina is a sensitive person whom quite obviously you fail to understand, you did harm to your own reputation as you may now have discovered and this has not endeared you to Verolde or (quite honestly) to me. Messing about in Cannes and fiddling your expense accounts accordingly is irritating; but breaking up the party at Ding Dong (to the cost of the company), compromising Verolde over secret installations and then finally behaving in a grotesque way all over Cornwall is, I think you'd agree if you thought about it, carrying things a trifle *too* far. Anyway, for your own sake I hope you'll have the sense to leave the girl alone. I dislike saying this but she hardly welcomes your attentions (as

they say in Jane Austen novels!). Stop being a chump and lay off.

"Finally, don't embarrass Mike Gunter by trying to make legal issues out of things you clearly don't understand. Moreover, in view of the fact that your visit to Cornwall was uninvited and highly damaging to our company's interests, he's asked me to discourage you from putting in for expenses to cover the trip. Actually I told him that even you wouldn't attempt to make an expense claim against a net loss (think about it!).

"I like Gunter!

John."

Sheer rage stimulated Peter's brain into functioning again and he decided that a direct confrontation with Verolde was the only chance of restoring sanity into the situation. He felt that however much of a "baby" he was considered to be in matters of business he would take Forbes up on the point of Verolde's connection with TRAX.

Peter didn't trouble to phone up in advance (knowing what would happen if he did) but shaved carefully, with a hand that trembled nevertheless, and took a cab straight round to the offices of TRAX in Victoria. The company occupied one of the big new buildings in the new complex in and around the one-way traffic system and Peter arrived there and paid off the cab just after 5.30.

It was as good a time as any to try it. Almost certainly Sedgewick's secretary would be scurrying, along with the rest of the crowds, towards Victoria Station and almost certainly Sedgewick would be working late – he nearly always did – without her and almost certainly Peter (who was known to the commissionaire on the door) would be able to get up on the escalator without being intercepted.

In fact, nobody stopped him, but the commissionaire failed to offer his usual friendly greeting. As Peter clacked across the huge concrete hall of the place he noted that the man stared across at him thoughtfully and picked up a phone – one of three, all different colours, on the reception desk.

The building had mostly cleared of day staff and Peter had the escalator to himself. The mechanism of the moving stairs un-

rolled its conveyor of obliging, rubberized steps almost silently and lifted him gradually up through the barrenly modernistic super-hall . . . up past the great clock inset in phoney-marble, four-foot-tile wall (the clock had no figures and from this angle you couldn't tell the time by it) . . . up through the balcony of the mezzanine floor and thenceforth into the husk of the sound-proof section reserved mostly for interviewing suites. The choice of lifts was presented and Peter took one up to the sixth floor.

By which time Chris Sedgewick was expecting him.

Sedgewick's full, middle-executive-type face displayed a superficial good humour of the ironic kind. The friendly arm that clapped him on the shoulders was avuncular and tolerant; the spoken welcome jovially contrived.

"Shackleton! Come through." He led the way along the thickly-carpeted corridor, then on through the large, open-plan typing pool. A solitary woman jerked a sheet of paper from a typewriter and stared thoughtfully as they went past. All other machines had their covers in place. One fluorescent tube of the lighting scheme neurotically flickered, erratic in its death-throes, and the woman cut the switch, leaving only the dim ones spaced along the walk-through.

At the end there was a pair of double doors and under the crack came the faint whistle of rushing wind, alerted by the air-conditioning system. Through here were the executive offices of the computer division. Sedgewick's was medium-sized and well-padded. No lingering tobacco-smoke spoiled the freshness of the air. The chrome ashtrays, recently emptied, did not telegraph the stresses of a long working day.

Sedgewick went straight to a cabinet and produced matching decanters. "Drink?"

"No thanks."

Sedgewick hesitated, looked at Peter, took the stopper off the scotch. "I'll pour it and you decide. You look as if you could use one, quite honestly. Why the unheralded visit? John came here a couple of days ago and cleared up the . . . the misunderstanding over the installation charges at Mercer's."

Peter happened to know for certain that the contract with Mercer's had been handled by Mike Gunter (the lawyer) direct. He said: "It was no error of mine."

The eyes came round, jovially. "Who said it was? I just thought you'd come about that and didn't know that John had cleared it up already." The smile broadened. "I can see I shall have to go carefully, with you . . . ! Soda? Ice? Well, anyway, have it if you want it. It won't break the company." He took his own in a heavily embossed, cut-glass tumbler and heaved himself with a grunt into the chair behind the desk. "Well . . . shoot."

"I want you to arrange an appointment. With Verolde."

"Oh."

There was a long silence. Sedgewick got up again, finding that the attitudinizing required of him called for other measures. He adopted a half-leaning position with his back to the hot-air inlet, folding his arms and looking concerned – in quotation marks. "Verolde is not an active member of the board and in any case the board don't take much interest in the running of the company – I'm glad to say. Why don't you phone him direct?"

"I've tried that."

"Oh. What do you want to see him about?" A broad grin suddenly divided his face. "Are you coming to work for us? Not quite your taste, is it, Shackleton? I thought you liked, er, sort of roughing it. Judging from the state of your office."

Peter said flatly: "I'm not fussy . . . But it seems I already *am* working for Verolde."

A mild grimace. "Oh, then it's true. You've struck lucky, I would have thought. Or don't you think so?"

"Look. Sedgewick. I don't want to go into details. I just want to get to Verolde. Can't you help?"

A silence. Sedgewick strolled – slowly – back to the desk, apparently savouring some pleasurable moment. He sipped thoughtfully from the massive glass. "I hear there were . . . *happenings*, down at the weirdy hole. Ding Dong, isn't it called? It's a weirdy name for a start. You seemed to, um, join in the fun a bit."

"I don't know what you're referring to. Did John tell you something with an enticing flavour?"

"John? Good Lord, no. I just heard. Some girl, wasn't there? You'll have to be more careful! I got tangled with a slightly unco-operative little piece a couple of years back. Up in Birmingham, it was. I didn't go quite to your lengths but she did

rather annoy me. The thing is, as they say, you have to draw the line somewhere. My information is that you drew it rather beyond the right-hand margin. You must be slipping, Peter."

Peter choked back his reaction. "Christina is hardly a little piece to me."

An automatic smile. "Oh, sorry, old boy. Bad luck. All the same, I don't see how I can help you. I can't get you to Verolde."

"You could tell me how all these rumours started."

"Why bother? If they aren't true they don't matter."

"They're harming my chances of fishing Christina out of the crazy world she's been bullied into."

"Bullied? Look, isn't she doing what she wants? I know I don't know the girl, but why do you think she's under pressure from anyone? – except possibly yourself?"

"I'd find it easier to believe that if she wasn't so obviously torn between two things."

"But she might still be doing what she wants: she might *want* to be torn between the two . . . sort of playing off one against the other. We're not all as simple-minded as you. Sorry, I didn't mean that brutally."

"Don't worry; I take it as a compliment."

"Yes, you would! You run away from machines and think we should all be going about in animal skins, with the women bearing pitchers of water on their delectable heads . . . I mean, I gather from John that you tried to indoctrinate this girl Christina against the Musiconics serenade, but why bother? You may not like it, but she does. Isn't that throwing your weight about, rather?"

"If Musiconics were just pretentious I wouldn't mind. But I happen to think it's sinister as well."

Sedgewick leaned forward, like a doctor trying to cope with a mentally afflicted patient. "Sinister?"

"Computers writing music when people can do it so much better."

"You know as well as I do it's not really the computers doing it. The computer is just a tool."

"That's the smug sort of answer one might expect from our Stan. But not from you. Can't you see that there's a 'relationship' between Stan and all that gear?"

"You're imagining it."

"No. He is. He's sold his fragile soul to technology and it's got bent in the works."

Sedgewick pouted a suitable grimace. "Sounds rather cockeyed to me, Peter. You talk like this crank Stranger. He goes rushing around warning everybody that they're even more bonkers than he is. Haven't you met him?"

"I saw him. Down in Penzance."

"Oh, yes . . . I don't doubt it. The Lord only knows what he's expecting to happen."

Peter said: "But I can guess. I spent enough time with the technocratic nuts in the U.S.A. to see where things are leading."

"My dear fellow! Do tell me: where *are* they leading?"

"Why don't you read Turing? Or Weiner?"

"I've read both. They don't frighten me. They merely thought that computers will be cleverer – eventually – than the ones we've got now. I say that's all to the good. We'll have better tools, that's all. And what on earth has this got to do with Musiconics? – and for that matter your pursuit of Christina all over Cornwall?" He pushed back his chair, got up. "Look, let me take you round our night-computing room. We've got a big job on there that might interest you. It's a medical diagnosis program . . . a project handed us by the International Psychiatric Association. I don't want to seem too caustic, but I would have thought such work was for the good of mankind – not its annihilation! Or don't you agree?"

"Of course I agree . . . and I needn't waste your time having a look – thanks all the same. I'm an electronics engineer and I've seen hundreds of perfectly normal people doing an excellent job on computers."

Sedgewick shrugged and sat down again. "Well, then . . . How can you have it both ways?" He smiled maddeningly. "I think you need a rest, Peter. At least . . . you certainly need a drink!"

The phone went, and Chris Sedgewick, still grinning, swivelled himself around in the chair as if he'd been practising it. The mannered smile still held when he snatched the phone up with an executive flourish . . . part of a co-ordinated movement stimulated by the first ring of the bell. Had Peter not felt so weighed down and beaten he might not have noticed the similarity between the

repetitive actions of Sedgewick and the performance of Pavlov's dogs of conditioned-reflex fame. Bitterness makes you observant about things you wouldn't normally give a second thought.

The phonecall, though monosyllabic, was apparently gratifying; for the beam broadened as the receiver was returned to the hook. "Look, Peter . . . Don't go. I've got to go one floor up for a moment but it's only to sign something. And do for heaven's sake drink your drink."

Sedgewick, all friendly and reassuring, left the room; and a couple of minutes later his secretary poked her head around the door.

Peter said: "I thought you'd gone home."

The girl said nothing for a few seconds, then came slowly in. She was distinctively brunette; and Peter had remembered her for her customarily mischievous expression . . . a permanent air of someone who specializes in pulling the rug from under the feet of the more pompous male. There was none of that now. She watched Peter as he picked up the heavy glass for the first time. The glass was encrusted with some deeply-embossed design. Peter didn't notice what it was, just ran his fingers up and down the grooves.

The girl said at last: "As you see, I haven't."

"Oh. Are your services required later? – at least over a dinner table?"

"At least? . . . oh, I see what you mean. Yes, I believe so."

"You could always refuse."

She didn't say anything at all to this, but went on in the same flat voice: "There are rumours about you."

"I know. I've heard them."

"I know they're not true," she said.

"That makes you original. Only, how?"

"It's easy," she said. "Everything's on your sleeve. I know . . . what you'd be like."

Peter looked straight at her. "I wish to hell I felt free," he said. "But all the same, you'll meet me? Afterwards?"

"Yes." She added: "Don't waste your time with Chris Sedgewick. To the likes of him you're a permanent joke."

"And what is Sedgewick to you?"

"He's no joke."

Sedgewick returned, looking agitated. He muttered "excuse me" and slid open the door of the informator room, then slammed it tight shut after him.

Peter grimaced at the girl and said: "What's in there? A private betting shop?"

"An informator console."

"Oh . . . from Sedgewick's expression I thought he might be losing on the horses. What's an informator console, for God's sake?"

The girl adopted a posture and declaimed: "It's a remote control position which gives limited access to a computer" – and intimated by actions calculated to offset the pompousness of brochure-phraseology that computers weren't exactly on her mind.

Actually, Peter thought: '*Why do you sell sex, like that? With your looks there's no need to.*' But aloud: "Blue Angel? – about eleven?"

She nodded, lips slightly parted. "Can do," she said.

When Sedgewick came back into the room he looked less tense but still uneasy. Muttering "Sorry" rather absently to Peter he picked up the phone without the flourish and, asking the operator for a line, dialled a number direct. "Rawlins," he said, then: "Never mind that; it's urgent." To the girl: "Get me a refill for this," – handing her his glass. She pulled a wry face at Peter and went to the decanters. To Peter: "You want another?"

"No thanks."

Sedgewick, on phone: "Rawlins? – Sedgewick here of TRAX. Listen, we're getting a kind of breakthrough and I can't make it out." He glanced up at Peter momentarily, as if judging how much he could say in front of him. The girl crossed with the drink. Sedgewick sipped some and resumed: "The installation at, er —" another anxious glance, ". . . at, er, St Ives. Surely it shouldn't connect through to you, should it?" A short pause as the man at the other end tried to say something. Evidently Sedgewick interrupted. His face, impatient, showed malice as he raised his voice in protest. "I mean, the St Ives circuit is a separate military network, isn't it . . .? Well, how are they getting our stuff?" Another pause.

Peter was careful not to show interest. But St Ives wasn't far

from Ding Dong, wasn't far from the tower, wasn't far for that helicopter to travel . . . He lit a cigarette and waited.

Sedgewick hammered on with: "Yes, well, if it was impossible it wouldn't *be* happening, would it?! I want it looked into, and at once. Thank you." He slammed the receiver back on the hook and this time managed the executive swivel. His grin was, however, a little jaded. To Peter, "Look, we'd better wrap this up, if you don't mind," – carefully avoiding looking at the girl. "As a matter of fact I'm going out to dinner." He stood up. "Come and see me, any time." More vaguely: "I don't know what I can really do to help, but . . ." – and left it.

Peter murmured something suitable, shot the girl a private look, and left.

His last impression of Sedgewick was one of neurosis. Sedgewick, running one finger up and down the embossed grooves in the whisky glass, was unconsciously rubbing his groin with the other hand, as if someone had kicked him there.

She called herself Gillie. She was an hour late at the Blue Angel. Peter was preparing to leave, feeling sick with loneliness and dejection.

"Chris Sedgewick wouldn't let me go. I think he sensed something."

At the table in the clubroom, Peter asked: "Have you ever slept with him?"

She showed no surprise at the question. "Frequently. Do you want to know what it's like?"

"Not much. Let's dance, instead."

On the little floor she was sensually yielding, rather than positive in her femininity. There was no coming-towards from her, yet no resistance to approach. Consequently she did not remind Peter of Christina, and consequently his heart-ache could be filed away neatly for just a while. For as long as their bodies were in contact the tranquillizer worked. At length they were the only couple left dancing for this number; others had gone back to the tables, to get some good, healthy alcohol into their systems in anticipation of the good, healthy floor-show.

Slow tempo, lingering piano, pleading guitar. Peter, rather drunk, let the dim lights of the place spiral into an indefinite haze

before his vision; guitar player carouselled and became a dining couple, then a crowded entrance, then a spotlight with a coloured disc, slowly rotating . . . pink . . . mauve . . . gold . . . blue. Then the guitar player became a guitar player again.

Peter led the way between tables to the back of the dimmed room. Tony, the head waiter, uttered on the subject of a suitable drink, using his carefully preserved Italian accent. The drinks came. A waiter poured. Gillie talked.

"Don't laugh . . . I thought I was in love with him once."

"I never laugh about love."

"Am I pretty?"

"Incredibly pretty."

"Can you stop thinking about her and think about me?"

"When I touch you." He added: "Now I can. Go on about Chris Sedgewick."

"You sure you want to hear?"

"It's what you came on to here for."

"Only partly."

"Let's deal with that part first, then."

"Chris is one of those people who are always afraid of losing their masculinity."

Peter looked amused. "How can you lose your masculinity? Either you've got enough of it, or not. It's a ratio, not a consumer product. Anyway, he certainly seems masculine enough to me."

She said: "You know how it shows first? – boredom."

Peter said: "Boredom can just be boredom. You mean, bored by women? I've got my ration of homosexual friends. They don't seem bored by women. It's a blunt question, I know: but are you sure —"

"– that it isn't just me that bores him? I suppose it could be. I'm not conceited. Not in that way. But he's always going on about it; both to me and his wretched stag friends. And yet he's so elaborate about finding other females attractive – as long as he doesn't have to talk to them."

"He sleeps with other women?"

"As if he's going to the lavatory."

"Well, that's familiar enough." Peter stubbed out a cigarette. "Isn't that considered very masculine, among that crowd? I thought it was the Norm."

"Do you do it?"

"Frankly, no. But then, I'm not concerned with the Norm. Why are you telling me this?"

"Perhaps because he hurts me."

"And perhaps not. You're not in the least bitchy. It can't be that, Gillie."

"All right." She looked at him, her lips slightly apart. The coloured light from the spot glossed them to a high finish. They were perfect. They failed to leave Peter cold. He felt guilty about it. She understood, smiled, then became serious again. "Ask yourself!" she said.

"Ask what?"

"Ask yourself about conflicting people . . . You know what I mean by conflicting people? I mean people with two hooks. You never know which one is going to catch. Sometimes both hooks catch. Then they're two people at once. If one hook catches there's always the chance that the other one will. So they're not safe, and nor are you. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I've never heard it put quite like that, but my God I know only too well what you mean."

"Your girl?"

"I thought you didn't want me to think about her?"

"I didn't know it fitted."

"You may take it that it does."

"Then you have a problem."

The band beat a brisker tempo. Several couples got up and jumped about on the floor. Peter and Gillie didn't move.

Peter asked, staring at the dancers: "What *happens* to people like that?"

"I've thought a lot about it," said Gillie. "I think usually that one hook gets stronger and stronger – if it's hooked on to the right thing – and the other hook gets weaker and weaker. It's the way people grow up."

"Is it?"

"Well of course, you wouldn't know, because you're not the kind of person with two hooks. You've got one very strong hook."

Peter felt doubtful about this. "I'm not so sure!" – and looked at her frankly.

She shook her head. "You're wrong. You're just being normal."

"With a small 'n', I hope?"

"Yes." She flicked a smile. "Spontaneous, then."

"That's better."

"If you had two hooks, you wouldn't have told me about your girl at all."

"You knew."

"You idiot! It's written all over your face. Some people don't have emotions like yours. They switch them off . . . *Zonk!*" She gave a rotating motion of the wrist. "Like that."

"Sounds wonderful. I wish I could do it. What do you have to do? – to qualify? Have a brain operation?"

She said: "In a way."

Peter said: "If you think Christina can switch off like that you're wrong. I know she's suffering. That's why I can't do anything to hurt her."

"She's only had half the operation."

This answer made Peter's flesh creep. "What does that mean?"

"I'm not talking about surgery."

"I know that! You're talking about a process. But what process?"

"It's just . . . something I can sense."

Peter looked at her hard. "Then if you can sense it, someone must be doing it."

"Peter, I'm *afraid*. Don't you understand? Don't you see why I wanted to talk to you?"

He nodded, very thoughtful. "To see whether you still could."

Later, after the cabaret, her intentions became clearer. She did, in fact, work around slowly to the point, but somehow Peter figured it ahead of her. He could do this mostly by the touch of her body as they danced.

But she actually stated it, later on, when they were back at the table, chewing sandwiches and tapping the second bottle of wine.

The place was nearly empty. Now, the couples moved at half the tempo of the tune. They were dark silhouettes of indistinct pairs, mere huddles of limbs lost in the gaping goal of fantasy.

"That's what they're paying for," said Gillie. "Ten pounds for a guaranteed dream . . ." On her own subject she went on: "Two hooks, Peter. Like your friend John."

"*Friend!*"

Silence . . . and again, Gillie's peculiar sensual alertness, the tingling exposed nerve that she had bared once before in Sedgewick's office.

It made Peter feel uncomfortable in a way he couldn't define; but it was more like being caught unawares with a girly magazine than drinking in a dimmed nightclub with the genuine article. Now, she shifted about on the seat, as if on the fringe of orgasm that would never actually take place.

"Peter . . . Please take me home." Eyes. "Your home?"

"I don't want to. I'm not going to hurt her."

The changing colours in the spotlighting went once through their garish repertoire, shafting across the girl's face, showing her stark emotional nakedness. And for one wild moment, as the green filter wheeled before the lens, Gillie was a Bacon painting . . . the tormented creature retracing footsteps right back to the birth trauma, only one decibel from a permanent scream.

Then it was gone; the gold cellophane erased the thought, tinted and caressed Vaseline lips and perfect skin, shimmered in hair that fell so subtly at an angle with the alluring tilt of her head.

Peter found himself angry. It was wrong that the mere rotation of a coloured disc should manipulate an impression so profoundly . . . the glossy magazine signalled its message at the whim of the printer's ink, and each fantasy replaced its predecessor after only five seconds exposure.

"No," he said, and beckoned to a waiter.

Then, surprised, he found that Gillie was trembling. He still wasn't touched. There seemed to be something clinical behind all this. He felt cheated. All those people on the floor . . . at least they could escape. This girl wasn't offering escape. She was offering something in a test tube.

Then she made it worse by trying to explain. "When they go into this thing," she said, "they stop making love."

"My God. You want to use me to see whether you can still do

it. If you can't still do it, you're one of *them*. Is that the long and the short of it?"

She looked at him, her eyes hollow with fear. His expression: grim and uncompromising.

She said: "Is it so awful of me, to want the truth?"

"What truth? I don't want to hear any more of your 'truth'." The waiter brought the bill. Peter signed it quickly. "Do you know why you make me so angry . . .? Because I've never heard anyone sell themselves so short in my life. Be a tart, by all means. Go and charge someone the earth for your services. But for Christ sake don't go around in a starched operating-theatre uniform without having the anaesthetist on hand. You're upsetting the patient."

"My God," she said, "you're cruel!"

"Then try pride. That might save you. Because from the freezing cold way you make your freezing cold approach, I would say you don't have to prove your frigidness in my apartment. You've done it already."

And then, suddenly, it happened. A look of such fury in her face that even Tony – who was used to almost anything – shuddered visibly and got well away from the table.

The slap rang out like a pistol shot and silenced the band.

Peter did not put a hand to his stinging face; but sat there, perfectly still, waiting. So did everyone else.

She cried and said she was all right and wouldn't go home with Peter who wanted her to like crazy and was vastly relieved when she didn't.

Pits of the stomach being what they are, Peter couldn't sleep that night . . . only writhed, thinking of Christina and why he could not hurt her even to the extent of seeking a despairing escape.

On an impulse he dressed again, got the car out, and drove flat out for Cornwall, leaving London at three a.m.

You go through Exeter.

First light doped the sky over the cathedral city, just tinting the edges of modern shop buildings and slick office blocks. Fresh breeze driving in from the estuary flipped at discarded newspapers soon to be forked up by streetcleaners but not quite yet.

Peter slid the window open and inhaled tangy air, felt a brief joy, then somehow this made him remember the misery all the more . . . But ahead, the elegant matchbox of Bobbie's Store, glass panes glistening in pink morning light. Behind that, somewhere on the hill, Exeter University going up building by building with accelerating exuberance born of the rat-race renaissance . . . Left from Paris Street and down towards Exe Bridge and the old pubs crammed in around the cathedral where ancient narrow passageways circumnavigate the latest in bus shelters, public lavatories, supermarkets, and concrete streetlamps, but you can't see the cathedral from the road.

Then out and beyond, through the scatter of sparse council estates and then the greenness of the road west.

Ground mist swirling over Dartmoor . . . ponies, shrewish and wild, scampering to the roadside then shying off from the car, feigning fear, but just taunting really.

St Ives . . . and the grim façade of NATO buildings basking in undeserved brilliance of the autumn morning . . . white metal gates stretched wide across the gaping approach-road. Not very inviting and Peter didn't stop there – no ingenuous illusions concerning the value of the direct approach to a man whose every intent was concealed behind sungoggles . . .

High dawn singeing the coastline of Cornwall, catching in spume as channel water trying to be an ocean slams against rocks pointlessly . . . milkmen and garbage carts and smalltown wakenings, mild glances at a fast passing car with Peter in it. Unshaven man in an open neck shirt, they observe, clinging to a wheel and much too tired to drive. Going fast and fighting sleep. What for? Can't imagine.

Cows, careful.

Finally, full morning at the nick of the road where the Gurnard's Head swings its inn sign disconsolately, but coffee waits. Gulp it, say nothing, don't explain the beard, don't explain your tension, get back on the track that leads south crosscountry three miles to Ding Dong.

Nobody in the cottage; shutters up, garage empty, nothing moves. Only the sound of the sea.

End of hope, end of panic, end of energy, end of dream.

Yet . . . Why was that bolt wet with oil? I mean, up in the

engine room? I mean, under all that rubble of Coke bottles and picnic litter?

Does it matter? Does anything matter?

Peter pulled himself together, suddenly felt objective and sensible. Suddenly felt rather fit, despite everything. He got a spanner out of the toolbox, left the car outside the cottage, and strode on foot along the rough road towards the tower where he and Christina had been together for the last time.

Long grass and tangleweeds gave out rich smells of country. Gulls soared overhead and spoke. Wet dew caught on wild plants sprouting from the hedgerow freshened Peter's hands as he picked at protruding leaves, just for the hell of it.

He was whistling.

But in the tower itself the rising breeze played its own tune, catching in the severed chimney and syphoning through the gaps between granite chunks and hollowing through the gothic-shaped window in which Christina once had stood framed. Peter toughened himself against the image and chucked the spanner down on to the metal flange where it landed with a clatter among the eroding picnic bric-a-brac long left over from forgotten holidays.

Shifting the metal lid of the mineshaft proved difficult; it was very heavy and fitted flush with the aperture. You had to get a tool under the edges and though Peter found a couple of tin bottle-openers among the rubble these just bent under the weight. There was nothing suitable in the engine house and in the end Peter had to go out and hunt around in the long grass for discarded oddments. A dilapidated iron fence provided the answer: two uprights from the tangled coils of barbed wire were loose in the ground. Peter unstaked them, was just about to return to the blockhouse when he spotted an approaching car, some way off but heading up the track towards him.

There was little point in trying to get clear; the vehicle was coming from the direction of the cottage where his own car was parked. He couldn't get back unseen.

Savagely he shoved the right-angled stakes beneath the flange, easing one edge at first, then getting the full strength of the wedge crooked under it. He strained at the metal plate and at last it was lifted off.

Dank stale air came up from the gaping orifice below, and from the gravel track outside, the scatter of pebbles beneath tyre tread as the car swung around the last bend and drew up.

But a spasm of sheer triumph none the less . . . there were modern metal rungs leading down into the shaft. A subterranean technology had a nerve-end exposed.

The unmistakable hum of electronic equipment, dim glow from red, green, yellow indicator lamps, warmth from buzzing transformers . . .

Peter jumped down on to a concrete platform. Beneath him a drainage grid led down to the mine deep below. Before him, there it was: installed where the roots of an ageing Watt engine once had derived firm support stood a neat, up to date, and entirely conventional Coaxial Cable Repeater System, with its associated switchgear and volt-meters and test equipment and neatly bunched, multiple-colour wires. Nearby, on what was evidently a voice-frequency demodulator, a V.U. meter flicked up and down a calibrated dial, like the recording-level meter of the sound equipment Forbes–Shackleton had sold to Musiconics.

As yet, no footsteps overhead. Peter hunted round rapidly for some means of monitoring the line . . . a pair of headphones or a loudspeaker, something like that. Usually it is possible to plug in; but either there were no facilities for this or the necessary equipment had been carefully concealed and stowed away. The agitated, neurotic-looking pointer of the dial jiggered on, hectic in its anxious effort to keep up with whatever was being said by someone on this continent with an opposite number on another one . . . Europe, or America, the Soviet Union —

"*Good morning, sir!*"

So this was it.

The intruder climbed very carefully down the steps and stood beside Peter, gazing at the equipment as he had done.

This man was lank and bony and sloppily dressed. Greying hair dishevelled; untidy moustache, once military, now out of hand and minus its discipline. The voice was like a nail file; the disposition donnish but not pedantic, conveying an overall impression of unapologetic eccentricity. The arms gestured with extravagance and the mouth grimaced and pouted like a French politician explaining away a routine change of government.

"I see!" said the man, as if commenting on a report in *The Times* about something he expected already. Then to Peter: "Sir. You need breakfast. We pick up your car and we go the nearest egg closely pursued by several rashers of back bacon. We boost this with freshly ground coffee and innumerable slices of crisp bits of toast. On the toast we arrange for a film of butter to the thickness of exactly one-tenth of an inch and ensure an adequate supply of sharp-flavoured marmalade. We then lean slightly back and, thoughtfully exuding tobacco smoke, we exchange views on just what the blazes happens to be going on." He grinned. "Do I successfully interest you in *that* project?"

The cigarette stage having been reached in the comfortable solitude of a large and deserted hotel restaurant, the man whom Peter recognized as Richard Stranger said: "Science involves the use of the mind; technology, the use of the brain. I do not like technology. I like technocrats even less. I like military-technocrats hardly at all; and if there's one thing I loathe beyond all others it is a technocrat who is all money and no soul. One of these is Verolde. There are many others. Their life is fantasy, for riches frighten more than they please. Totally inarticulate, these morons slowly go crackers. With their staring eyes they look but cannot see. They utter dollar signs but do not communicate. They marry and do not love. And in total ignorance of what computers really do, they buy up Leo and Univac and IBM and express thereby the vacuum of their paranoia by evolving a subterranean scheme of things that ordinary folk can't delve . . . Have some more eggs? – more toast? Let's start all over again from the beginning. Yes?"

"I'd far rather hear you talk."

"Hah!" A shrewd look registered across the table. "I suppose you're wondering how much I know . . . about your girl friend, I mean . . . All I knew at first was that she was a friend of John's, whose tutor I was at Eton . . . Then – well, you'll learn gradually; if I tried to tell you everything now you'd find it unnecessarily complicated."

"But I don't see why you took such a persistent interest in John."

"I was at school with his father."

"Oh . . . all in the family, then?"

"This is no time for social reforms, Shackleton. It's all perfectly disgraceful and I won't defend it. But did you know John's father was killed in an air crash, a month ago? A very interesting passenger list that was altogether, considering that a quite extraordinary number of opponents to the new technology just happened to be aboard."

Peter looked perplexed. "But what possible quarrel could Forbes Senior have had with the technocrats? I thought he was with the Ministry?"

"He was. He was also in touch with me, at the Freid Institute. And that didn't go down at all well with the technocrats – like Verolde, for instance. Ever noticed that man's eyes?"

Peter was thinking of his dream. "Yes, as a matter of fact."

"Hah! They are like the very radar he sells. Across the face of the tube the little beams of electrons search around, looking for targets."

"And one of them was me?"

The moustache arranged itself in a grim straight line. "We know this much: Verolde brought a punch-card back with him from America" – he looked up – "and the little holes in it were some kind of danger signal to him. You see, by knowing John in the first place you were too close to Christina already —"

"– but why? Why did it matter to them?"

"Why did it matter that you met her? I don't know . . . entirely. But if you visit us down at the Freid you'll learn some of it. We're in Exeter." He rummaged around in the baggy old suit for another of the interminable cigarettes. "I left Eton to join them . . . You're finding it hard to concentrate, aren't you?"

"If you know anything about Christina . . . where she is . . . anything . . .! I wish you'd tell me."

"What's the use? You can't go chasing after her now! Look what happened before!"

"Let me be the judge of that. Where's John, then? That I'm sure you know!"

There came a pause. Stranger's troubled eyes searched him briefly, and saw the loneliness. Quietly he said: "They're both in Switzerland."

"So they're together!"

"Not quite in the way you think."

"What other way *is* there?"

"Oh," said Stranger with a bland gesture like a fisherman's, "winter sports can be really very innocent . . . at least in the sense I think you mean."

"You realize . . . I shall have to go there?"

"I suppose that's as good a way as any of wasting your time. And don't look so furious; it isn't my fault. Clearly you must go, in order to achieve nothing. Achieving nothing," said Stranger with no outward sign of jest, "is sometimes very important. And I can even help you with the trip, as I know that part of the world quite well for all the best reasons."

"And . . . you're sure this relationship between John and Christina is innocent?"

"Deadly innocent. The one thing you don't need to worry about is her constancy to you. I won't explain that. There is too much to explain, in the total absence of explanation."

Peter felt a terrible relief welling up inside him. He was exhausted and, like all Englishmen, terrified of tears. Controlled, he asked: "What else is in Switzerland?"

"Hah! Good question. You are searching for links. Let me describe just one. I was a scholar at Eton myself, then went on to King's College to study mathematics and – why shouldn't an ageing athlete boast? – to stroke the Cambridge Eight. At King's there was a bloke I didn't like. A Swiss. At that time he was studying psychology. His brain was recognizably like your partner's . . . all intellect and no mind. The name of this pedant at King's was Moyen. I learned that later he studied medicine, then finally psychiatry. Brains bulging, he went back to Cambridge on a Project (what a multitude of sins that word covers!) just as John Forbes arrived, all crisp and glib and wise, at King's for some purpose or other to do with social climbing but not involving outriggers or a river or a rowing-coach's megaphone.

"What happens? Right, sir! Moyen and Forbes, like two monster babes in the wood, magnetize each other with their dotty ideas and one more link in the chain is forged. Moyen eventually joins the staff of a clinic near Andermatt in Switzerland and after

the hands of the clock have rotated a few thousand times, Forbes conveys his intellect to Andermatt by aeroplane – accompanied by a pair of skis and your girl Christina."

Peter, at once: "Where are they staying?"

"Ahah! Impatient young man. I only need ten more minutes! But to continue: Last night you go to TRAX . . . Don't look so startled! The decorative Gillie is someone we have been watching. Both her, and Sedgewick.

"Well, last night she phones us up at the Freid. That must have been quite an interview you had, at the Blue Devil or whatever it was."

"The Blue Angel . . . I'm afraid I was a bit ruthless."

"Far the best thing. I think a shock like that did it. She was almost an iceberg and you stopped the freezing process just in time. Hell to pay, sir! Apparently she had screamed over the phone at Sedgewick, calling him impotent. At that time of night I should think it can be quite startling. Sedgewick was indeed startled. What happens? He is on his way in an ambulance plane to where do you think? – The Clinic of the Snows, only one roll of the snowball from where John is now."

Peter said thoughtfully: "But if Chris is impotent he must *know* he's impotent. I can understand his being humiliated. But are you saying he's mentally ill?"

"Hah! Don't be so irritatingly healthy! *Fantasy*, my dear sir. The famous process of attributing the most amusing – if not very rational – reasons for almost anything on earth. Like too busy. Like bored with someone. Like otherwise engaged. Like religious. Like conscience. Heavens. What's the use of trying to explain to you the essence of paranoid-schizophrenia?"

To Stranger's surprise, Peter said: "I think it's easy enough to imagine. I've been completely shut off from dozens of people recently. I don't let myself think about it but I keep wondering—"

"– if they're right and you're wrong? Fiendish, isn't it! The modern way to intimidate is to pressurize the opposition into thinking it's mad. We just have to decide among ourselves which side is doing it."

Peter said: "Did Gillie tell you what happened in the office yesterday?"

"Yes . . . I gather something electronic got crossed up. And that wouldn't be the first time. The computer network held Sedgewick responsible and —"

"– The computer network did *what*?"

"Aha! Now I'm nuts. Very well. The episode was traced to a switchkey on the informator console in Sedgewick's office." Stranger's eyes were humorous. "The tracing of this fault and the composition of the fault report card itself . . . these two elements were provided by the computer."

"That's hardly the same thing."

"So be it. On the other hand Sedgewick appears to have gone off his head. Naturally I do not suggest that this came in any sense as a punishment."

For the first time Peter grinned back. "You're trying to tell me something."

"Good heavens. Am I?" An elaborate shrug of drooped shoulders. "Maybe I'm inviting you to think, Peter. Try defining what machines do. Then try defining what humans do . . . and then try and tell the difference."

"They'll lock me up."

"They'll certainly try." Stranger stubbed out his cigarette disgustingly in the marmalade. "But you must judge these things for yourself. Go to Andermatt. Then come back to me. Don't get all bitter and twisted. Christina won't be quite the same. You won't win her back . . . yet, if at all. Face it. You can: for it's not your fault."

"I have at least two dozen questions."

"Save them all. Find out all you can the hard way. Then, when you get back from Switzerland and have a number of talks with me and one or two others . . . well, you might not find some of it nearly so hard to believe. And Shackleton, you must believe in yourself. Got it? It's very important. Almost nothing else matters. For those who don't, there's the Trek."

"Trek?"

Stranger nodded. "It's what started the Freid Institute . . . You'll find out about it . . ." He got up, unsmiling now, and offered a vague hand. "Stay at the Schweizerhof Hotel – I'm known there and I'll write straight away to see you get in." He hesitated a moment, then turned back with an odd kind of smile.

"Oh, yes . . . I shall also be sending something there addressed to you."

"So mysterious?"

"It just requires a little thought . . . but it might give you just a very small opportunity of getting your own back. And, whatever the Christians say, it's very good for the soul!"

Chapter Five

TAKE a large granite bowl, several miles in diameter and about eleven thousand feet deep. Flake with snow and hold the temperature a few degrees below freezing point. Then take the funny shaped houses and hotels and banks which you have already fashioned and painted with bright colours, and distribute them in groups at the bottom of the bowl. Add the colourful little churches and flake more snow over these. Now take a fleet of bulldozers and cut two mountain passes with twisting roads, with wide-spanned bridges to jump the gorge. Near the top of one of these, place the remaining gay-looking buildings at the summit of a smooth slope of snow, and cause this slope to descend towards the little town. Dot with people and call it a ski resort.

Rent a car back in Zurich – where your aircraft has touched down – and drive as far as the Schweizerhof Hotel, Andermatt, where the large and amiable proprietor will answer most of your questions. The coffee lounge is panelled and sumptuous and you can sit there with your friends and be thankful that you are not as lonely as was Peter Shackleton when he ordered a drink and waited for news.

The large and amiable proprietor raised puddy hands in mild protest and said: "Be *patient* with me, *please*! I have many people but I have not forgotten, Mr Shackleton. Have your drink and soon we talk."

He busied himself at the desk, instructing a hectically active staff and talking down a Swiss-shaped telephone and smiling smiles at holiday-makers in a hurry; for skiing takes place, by definition, up on the gradient and not down in the town . . . time spent down here is time wasted. Take your colour pictures and get back up there.

The face of the large and amiable proprietor was dominated by his nose, which was actually a curiously small nose. It was, how-

ever, at the precise geometric centre of his face and was the reference point for the features which radiated outward from it. These various features arranged themselves in appropriate expressions for the benefit of the expensively-dressed emigrés whose route had taken them via Harrod's and Lillywhite's, onward through Ingham's or Thomas Cook's; or from further afield with PanAm or Air France or Lufthansa – from everywhere or anywhere for the mixed-up motivation of winter sports . . . escape, adultery, or even plain physical exercise.

Down here in the valley over morning coffee you needn't trouble with the phrase book because half the people you pass in Sloane Square are jogging your elbow. The other half would be jogging another elbow previously jogged in Rue de Rivoli or on Madison Avenue or any air terminal you care to name.

As the large and amiable proprietor's concentric features respond to the reset button for the next customer, who wants to cash a travellers' cheque and has left his passport inexplicably in a chair-lift, the thrumming conveyor-belt of snow-business is kept below-stairs; here you are merely conscious of the fantasy you're paying for.

But it takes more to keep this carousel going than the woolly jumper, the concertina, and the raftered room.

Up there in the mountains huge pylons are conducting electricity by the megawatt to keep the dream alive – the toy electric trains, emitting neither smoke nor diesel fumes to mar the nursery rug, pick up the current from overhead wires and obediently bring in the hordes. At the factories skis are laminated and pressed and packed and electric current winds up as slithery extensions to your uncertain feet. Great bus stations gape all over Europe and expel huge gloss-painted eight-wheelers which climb, nose to tail, the tortuous mountain passes. Oil dumps gush millions of gallons of fuel for snow ploughs and heating systems and factories for frozen food – snow notwithstanding – and beer bottling centres and milk bulk-delivery centres and all the machinery for one of the largest industries on earth: your holiday.

But the concertina relentlessly plays on; and the atmosphere of Andermatt – rustic outside, sophisticated within – blandly shrugs itself and becomes a part of the jovial features arranged around the

nose of the large and amiable proprietor of the Schweizerhof Hotel.

"Yes," he said, joining Peter and refusing a drink politely, "I remember Mr Stranger well. Naturally I will help you. He is – how shall I say? – the old-fashioned kind of Englishman. Polite. I remember well, this politeness of the old-fashioned Englishman." He glanced, thoughtfully, but blank-eyed, towards an English foursome two tables off. The velvet-green Aston Martin parked outside was the package deal in which they had been delivered to the hotel. Three of them were men of ascending ages . . . Tom, Dick, and Harry – call them what you will – starting at Tom, twenty-three and failed history degree, ending with Harry, thirty-seven, passed with a double-first in seduction but, like many a double-first before him, not well adjusted to the exigencies of wear and tear upon the character.

The girl was a product they used to call a starlet and her proper place would be atop the radiator of the Aston Martin, screwed down into the filler cap like an inanimate mascot. She had the beautiful, slim figure of the latest model at the Motor Show, and belonged with the accessories.

Tom, the youngest of the males, was slightly drunk. Already the misleadingly aesthetic features were showing the strain unique to the dissolute and his manner with the waiter had the stinging taunt of the sadist. His intention was to confuse the man by contravening each order, then laughing along with his compatriots as if viewing a captive baboon through bars. It was an unpleasant spectacle which the girl, who had come for the ride and for exactly what she could get, neither helped nor hindered. She sat back and smiled (Scene One, Take One) and smoked and waited for the gifts to fall into her proffered bosom.

Dick was very slim and pallid. He seldom spoke but had a nervous habit of fiddling with a swizzle stick and this was plainly infuriating the radiator-girl. He had sensitive looks and rather feminine mannerisms, matched by a pair of lips almost as sweetly curved as the girl's. His response to humour was a remote smirk, implying that the jokes were beneath him. All the same he didn't risk any improvements of his own but just sat, upright and hollow-backed, and watched the agonized gyrations of the waiter who was paid to take it.

Harry, the eldest, was overtly unpleasant and quite unaware that whatever superficial charm he might once have used for various purposes ranging from womanizing to mounting giant publicity schemes had long since worn off. His oily hands were, however, adept with the cheque book; and though one of them was practically inside the girl's dress in a reassuringly male gesture the girl was prepared for such minor hazards in the pursuit of perks. She made some sweet-natured remark quietly and Harry removed the hand and Harry also smiled which meant that Harry was not technically snubbed enough for the vital penholding fingers to be amputated as far as she was concerned. Grinning, he returned his attention to the waiter-baiting and honours were even.

The proprietor watched until the tasteless little scene had run itself through, accepted the despairing glance from the waiter humanely, and went on: "Mr Stranger comes here in the worst clothes it is possible to imagine. Impossible!" The puddy hands despaired. "His car it has no brakes and yet it hurtles up and down the Saint Gotthard's Pass like . . . how you say? – the dose of salts. The dose of salts," he repeated; then shot back to the desk to sort out a gesticulating situation over there.

He returned in five minutes and picked up with "the dose of salts. I do not know how he lived through it but there you are. His wife never turned a hair. They hardly ever lived together, you know," he put in suddenly. "But they always came here together. Funny, isn't it, the life . . . I have the letter from Mr Stranger in my pocket, where he writes about you." He found, after all, that he hadn't. "No matter. I digest it well." A direct look – or at least, a look as direct as the ill-defined eyes permitted. "First, you wish to go to the Clinic of the Snows. I wonder why but I do not ask why. You have a car?"

Peter said he'd rented one in Zurich.

The proprietor shook his head. "You do not waste good gas and good money. You take mine. The Clinic is on the reverse slope of that mountain" – he pointed vaguely towards the town clock, meaning the rise beyond it – "and the village of Stradt is near by. It is where the big power scheme is . . . the new hydro-electric station, whence come all these pylons you see on the mountain. Stradt," he added, dropping his voice for some reason, "is an unfriendly place. You will not like it. Still, I do not ask."

He paused a moment, then bonked a pudgy fist down on the table. "The next!" he exclaimed, "the next . . . you wish information about the two people and of these, Mr Stranger sends me photographs which I most carefully study and memorize. A girl – I find her beautiful . . ." he broke off, sensing Peter's misted feelings and employing his long experience in quick assessment. "I find her beautiful in this special, new way. Her name, I think, though I do not have the letter, is Christina Teuson?"

Peter said "yes" almost huskily; and the proprietor, a kind man, did not keep him in suspense. "Yes, I have seen her in Andermatt. She is in one of the mountain hotels, though. I have the address and my driver, he has marked it on the map."

"You are very kind and very thorough."

"Ach! It is so easy. As the Yankees say, what is difference? For me it is like a game . . . For you, I think, it is not like a game."

"It is not."

"I am so sorry. But I tell you: this Christina Teuson is not a happy person. Very strained." And he hared back to the desk to argue with a member of his own staff. He seemed aware, the whole time, of exactly what was happening behind his large, loosely-jacketed back. He mollified some irate visitor and the man behind the desk handed a key across and the visitor joined hands with an attractive girl who smiled at something said and they went upstairs together under the clinking symbol of one single key instead of the two separate ones previously prescribed. A small group of spectators had watched the fiasco and now muttered morally and compared wedding and engagement rings in collective discontent. For what was the point of it all, if the couple without so much as a curtain ring between them enjoyed the proprietor's urgent support in the circumstances?

"Very strained," continued the proprietor, watching these two disappearing with their one suitcase, "but not so her escort." He regretted the use of that word, saw how it wounded. But it was too late to withdraw it. He went on emphatically, splaying out ten fat fingers on the table top: "This man I do not like! He is the new type of slick English gentleman . . . like our friends over there. You take another drink? You sample our well-known local mixup? – the famed Swiss scotch and soda? Yes, I think I order one. I think maybe you need it, Mr Shackleton." He did so. "I think

also you must come to me for the further assistance. I answer the telephone at surprising hours of the night, also during the day sometimes. We are very busy and when I am very busy I always have time."

Peter said how very grateful he was and the proprietor got up and shook his head and said this was totally ridiculous as this was a pleasure and he would in any case be charging a small fortune for the room. "Holiday season," he said sadly. "Very expensive." And he was as good as his word in all things – notably the price of the room, where Peter flung himself on the bed, exhausted, to study the note which had arrived, as promised by Stranger, at the hotel.

Its contents managed to kindle a minor grin from Peter despite everything – as well as explain the link between Peter's own experiences in the States and the frigidly arrogant attitude of the Musiconics people at Ding Dong.

Peter pocketed the note and slept the better for the grim little joke it contained.

In the evening Peter took the proprietor's Citroën out to Stradt and the mountain above it.

On the way up the ice-cold pass the twisting road forked in two. Engineers had been widening the bend at this point and they had seared into the cliff face with huge, yellow-painted cutting machines which were parked on the flat piece of mud left by the excavating gear. Peter left the Citroën with the trucks and the bulldozers and headed back on foot in the bitter night air to inspect the signpost. For a while, though, he stood on the edge of the precipice and communed with a sharply-defined universe. Set against it, the supercooled masterpiece of Mount Susten bulked like a titanic ingot of chrome-steel and drained warmth from the body as you looked. Stars, almost vulgarly bright and clear, were cut off by the sharp mountain outline and Susten looked bigger than the universe which became its setting.

Peter checked the road sign, slithered back across the frozen mud with its indented bulldozer tyre tracks and slammed himself tight in the car.

The headlights caught in a power pylon.

Criss-crossed frame-members and drooping armpieces flashed

back a stoic beauty. Six insulators, long vertebrae with collar bones, formed ceramic thumbs-down, suspending glistening cables thick as rope. The wires formed the beginnings of each graceful arc, to be resolved somewhere further out there in the blackness at the next pylon.

On looking at it, Peter thought of a thick whisky glass for some reason. He thought of the pompous, self-satisfied Sedgewick with his air of remote control and his executive-type monster glassware.

He couldn't think why, though.

The pass topped its own crest and unwound, descending in successive hairpins to the tiny tucked-up village of Stradt.

For a place advertised as unfriendly it was nevertheless enchanting in appearance, possessing a kind of crystalline tweeness. Barn-type buildings with fascinating roof-shapes exuded the inevitable racket of the accordion but few people ventured into the street. The effect was slightly spoilt by the converging of pylons; for a hydro-electric station, tactfully pushed as far as possible into the rock behind, gushed its roaring wastepipe into the lake and churned up huge thundering vortices behind the scenes.

Down here you could see the bottom end of the chair-lift, stationary now, dangling silly-looking bucket seats over snow lying thick at the foot. Ruts of ski-tracks wound down from the three grades of slope and converged at the lower terminal of the chair-lift. Here a bungalow bar, bedecked with Chinese lanterns, marked the edge of a floodlit ice sheet where people skated with varying degrees of expertness. Distorted Beatle music was the choice of loudspeakerware. The record ended and the rasp of skate-edges ploughing ice competed with the sloosh of water from the powerhouse in the distance.

Peter drove on, up the steep incline marked glitteringly *to the Hotel Randolf*. A neon index finger encouraged maximum haste by pointing towards a cocktail glass outlined brilliantly in flashing purple. At the top, this *motif* was incorporated into the architecture of the hotel itself.

The finger with the rounded tip that pointed out towards the darkened ski slope was the main bar of the Randolf. Cantilevered so that it cleared the lower floors of the hotel, it jutted clear over the car park, and its crescent window – where the fingernail would correspond – lensed the magnificence of the receding mountainside

and the village of Stradt at the bottom of the bowl. Beyond Stradt was the high ridge through which Peter had just driven. Beyond that, Andermatt.

Peter parked underneath the finger and took the escalator up to the bar floor.

He saw her immediately, sitting alone by the curved window. And the miracle to him was that she seemed not to have changed at all. He could not have hoped to encounter this moment in cold blood; and indeed the shock of the surprise whitened him.

He saw the same high complexion and the same delicate graveness and the same slender detail of body emphasized by the cling of her clothes – for she was still in skiing things.

She had not seen him.

Peter, his head swimming, ordered a drink automatically, in the wrong language, and the barman repeated the order in silky English and mixed it. Peter saw that John was not in the room. Those that were were chatty and stimulated, responding brochure-like to mountain air. Piped music came from loudspeakers cheerfully and the smell of charcoal steak came through a swing door, frequently swung, off to the right at the far end of the bar-top itself.

He walked over and she suddenly saw him and he stood there and she said: "My God."

Every sight and sound other than her receded from his whole mind so that nothing existed beyond the pool of light that focused down upon them from the ceiling.

Christina saw the reddened eyes and the slight tremor around his mouth and she got up and said: "John's on his way up." She pointed. "Lead the way through there . . . through the dining room."

Peter looked at her briefly, finished his drink immediately, and went through.

They were only just in time. As the door oscillated on its spring back and forth, John came into view at the doorway of the bar, his spectacle lenses reflecting in duplicate the contrived luxury he observed. Christina glanced quickly through a small window inset in the door. "Keep away from the desk. It's room 417. I'll get the key and take the other lift. See you up there."

It was a single room. This fact quenched Peter's rage for the

moment. Or quenched whatever his true emotion really was. He stood well back from her and knew he was still trembling.

"What am I up against?" he said.

She explained nothing, but rang downstairs on the phone. She had them page John Forbes who later went to a phone somewhere down there, because it rang back after a few minutes.

Peter's perception was blurred and confused and he hardly noticed what she said on the phone to John but only knew that somehow it meant that Christina and he would be alone.

He knew that it meant that she could not wait any more than he could wait and that she could only undress as he did. He had no idea whether John accepted or believed her excuses any more than he could begin to solve the riddle regarding why having put him through inexpressible torment for so long and having identified with an endless pianola-roll of lies she was now moist from desire.

But she hung up the receiver and sat motionless on the edge of the bed, half-undressed and waiting.

And she chose to make her body Peter's plaything; so that through her full-yielding consent she became, far into dawn, both partner and contestant in a frenetic night-game. Her body was tinged with subdued light filtering from three-quarter moon through protecting pines outside, and tinged also with the aestheticism simply of being in love, and therefore of giving.

From the valley deep below came the roar of water booming in the chasm circumscribed by mountainous rock. This, their most uneasy lullaby, only heightened the ecstasies through some implied threat of ultimatum.

But they lay together afterwards so motionless in peace that all terror waned for the while.

Chapter Six

THE colours were as crudely satisfying as snaps from a cheap camera.

The early morning landscape seemed to deal exclusively in stark, primary dyes. The sky: primary blue . . . all the same shade. The snow: unarguable white. Mix the flat blue with an equal quantity of chrome yellow and there, all one shade, you had the child-green of the tree to one side of the car park, near the accusing finger of the cocktail bar.

Dotted about were the fire-engine-red sweaters of skiers, lit by a baby sun, complete with rays going out from it, which made everything stick to the terms of the brochure doggedly, as if one unforeseen nuance of nature might lead to a spate of cancellations.

Peter, wearing rented skis (not a bad pair either) waited near the Intermediate run which was marked out with bright red discs. Overhead, like a conveyor-belt for a baked-bean factory, the chair-lift mechanism zinged, steel hausers rolling over pulleys on the mast at the end, swivelling the seats around the corner and then dispatching them stupidly back down the slope. It was early, so not many of the chairs coming up from Stradt were occupied. But groups of human penguins were strolling now from the changing-room block, to the far left of the finger.

Nearest to the changing rooms was the summit of the beginners' run. The giggles from this department were loud and clear. The other side of intermediate, south of the finger and flanked by the mountainside via which Peter had arrived the previous evening, lay the steepest descent. Here was less laughter but more dedication. A certain kind of girl always lingered there, watching the he-men. The he-men checked the audience, then set off. Ripping sound from sliced snow as crouched bodies set out, churning powder behind and baffling the busty females with noble athleticism. Beyond them, steeply tipped by the sharp incline of the pass

road, a huge bus, heavily encrusted in chromium plate, whined up towards the hotel. Following on its tail a snorting sports car made innumerable jabs at overtaking, and never succeeded. Furiously, it growled and popped, inches behind the bus, till both swung around into the car park at the same time.

Peter, gazing in this direction and looking out for Christina, elevated his eyes to clear the top of the hotel and noted the dam. This was architecturally unapologetic; not trying to hide itself in the embarrassed way of the powerhouse down in Stradt – the other end of the concealed waterchute – but flaunting superbly graceful arches, narrow like cathedral windows, in a great, magnificent line between two excrescent hunks of mountain. White concrete dazzling, the massive structure buttressed back nearly one thousand million gallons of water to be converted, ultimately by its own weight, into domestic electricity. The magnitude of this statistic made striking contrast with the microscopic spatter of men on their way to work. They ambled along the road which ran along the top of the dam wall . . . ants crossing a plank.

Peter's eye descended naturally along the militant line of power pylons which spanned their cables clear over the hotel, disappearing later down towards Stradt. These power lines carried high-tension electricity up from the powerhouse, thence over the peak marked by the dam, and onward to the south-east.

Just as Peter caught sight of Christina approaching he realized with a jolt why the pylon he'd seen last night reminded him of Sedgewick of the opulent whisky glasses . . . the embossed design had rung some sort of bell with Peter even then – now there was no doubt left. The heavy tumbler had had a pylon motif deeply cut into the glass.

Christina had changed into more colourful garb as if to conform with the Kodak. Bright blue jumper with criss-crossed cord surmounted beautifully-cut ski-pants in rich fawn. She was nicely secure on her skis, did not make the unnecessary, extravagant movements with her body or spurious flourishes of ski-pole of the inexperienced decorative butterfly just behind her. Christina didn't do a glamour-puss entrance at the gate, but looked concerned as she peered at Peter's equipment and told him to tighten a strap. The butterfly coyed her body for a waiting boy friend and proved herself more adept with her eyelashes than with the sterner

stuff. She offered herself for a provocative kiss and cutied her derrière as a camera clicked obligingly from the angle intended. Peter and Christina laughed good-humouredly at the antic.

Then, as Christina turned to assess the state of the slope, Peter caught sight of the unprepossessing trio from Andermatt. He hadn't recognized the sports car, noted it now as it shone, Kodak-wise, in the glitter of Instamatic sun . . . *f*.8 at one twenty-fifth? . . . and don't jerk the camera.

Tom, Dick, and Harry had invented a brand-new gait: the Arrogant Slouch. With it they inspected the female talent, having evidently been ditched by the starlet. Tom, the shop-soiled aesthete, looked petulant when his motioned attempt to zero on to Christina was aborted by a warning arm extended by Harry, who evidently knew better. There were momentary hallucinations about the butterfly, but these petered out when she virtually wrapped herself around her escort in frank committal. Then the trio turned as one man and kicked three trails up to the hotel steps. After a pause to worship the Aston Martin they retired into the hotel.

Christina shouted: "Ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever get!" They shoved off and were down and away.

Christina was the better skier and Peter unashamedly let her go on ahead. The wind roared against his ear-lobes like slipstream against air-brakes. The run took them on a weaving course that periodically crossed under the groaning pulleys of the chair lift, whose wobbling shadows folded themselves around undulated bulbs of snow-mound, to join the projections of ski and skier and the occasional pine tree hazard.

Then again, the dangling, slatted feet of people riding up on the chairs . . .

And the sudden, immense shock of recognizing one of the riders.

Verolde.

Christina had seen him. Her body seemed to stiffen and there was the harsh scrunch of blade digging snow as she turned sharply, to race down into a gulley which dipped down between the two major runs.

Peter followed her down into this steeply-moulded basin. Utter

silence. Christina turned. All the carefree joy had gone from her face, which was drawn and also withdrawn. She said: "Did he see us?"

"I'm not sure. Why is he here?"

"A friend of his was taken ill." She pointed right across the Advanced run and the road. Between them was a group of buildings. "The Clinic of the Snows," she said.

Peter looked over the rim of the basin.

Just under one of the big pylons was a barbed wire fence, about a quarter of a mile away from where he was standing and some two hundred yards from the pass road. Following the wires with his eyes Peter found that the line of pylons spanned obliquely, somewhat towards them, to clear a bulge in the mountain ridge, then mounted the rest of the slope roughly parallel with the chair-lift masts though well away from them.

Nearing the next pylon up from the barbed wire fence was a man, walking laboriously through the snow. From his tracks it could clearly be seen that he had started back at the clinic. Inexplicably, the man appeared to be wearing pyjamas.

The clinic certainly commanded attention.

Fashioned as if from plaster of Paris, the central building had a macabre, organic quality that Peter found sensually disgusting though he couldn't see quite why. The basis of the design was evidently the female breast, but scrolled into a series of intermoulded cottage loaves. The mother-image this implied had, however, become grotesquely distorted and it was as if sick blisters had grown out of the snow. Only one tiny building had conventional lines – this could have been a chapel – but even this was threatened, as it were, by the overgrowth which contaminated it. So the little gothic building was stuck to the rest and conveyed the impression of a small rock to which a number of huge molluscs were fruitlessly jostling to attach themselves.

"So that's the place." His voice sounded loud in the snow-cavity, and only the zithering chair-lift cable soundtracked the longshot below. The man, now clearly pyjama clad, had reached the pylon and just stood, motionless, gazing up at it.

Peter recognized him and said: "My God . . . it's Sedgewick!" – and turned to look at Christina.

It was as if she knew what was going to happen; for after a

sudden, sharp intake of breath she made no movement, didn't even blink, just stared at the crazed figure below as if it meant something far beyond anything apparent to Peter.

There came a sudden scrunch of skis behind him at the top of the basin.

Peter turned – and found himself staring straight up at the vee-form of John's firm-planted legs, skis dug deep. Slung over his shoulder was the Bolex movie camera. Forbes had seen neither Peter nor Christina but, like her, seemed to expect something spectacular. So he stood, like a ski-clad judge, showing no pity, as if some sentence had already been passed. Ski-pole thrust down hard, he poised there, waiting, extending the weird silence and icy oppression.

Then he made a slight movement, and instinctively Peter whipped around to watch Sedgewick.

And Sedgewick suddenly jumped the barbed wire and started to scale up the pylon.

Peter shouted: "*Jesus!*" – expecting Forbes would instantly get down the slope. But Forbes hadn't moved . . . wouldn't have at all if he hadn't at that second seen Peter in the dip below. To get to Sedgewick Peter would have had to clear a hump in the snow. Forbes had the clear run down. Still he made no move.

"*John! For Christ sake stop him!*" – but scrambling up the intervening mini-ridge himself and churning loose snow, Peter anticipated the man.

With deliberation, as if altering a decision, Forbes dug the ski-pole afresh and skied off down.

Peter glanced back at Christina; he saw clearly in that moment that she was emotionally jammed . . . pulled by two precisely equal forces in two precisely opposite directions. Gillie's remarks about people with two hooks again leapt to mind; for at this instant both had fully engaged. Christina's expression was agonized, her feet rooted to crossed skis. A hypnotist would have tried snapping his fingers before her face.

John had got halfway down; and now Sedgewick, poised crazily on the first cross-member, stood like a tottering waxwork in catatonic impersonation of the pylon itself. Arms outstretched in some gesture of supplication, he remained there for a few seconds, then

cried out something. Peter had just reached the rim of the bowl, couldn't catch the words.

But whatever had been uttered, Christina seemed to guess it; and it was this call that electrified her into action.

For although she had started well behind Peter they both arrived at the pylon together.

Forbes, now enacting the responsible fellow in charge, shushed them both with his finger to his lips. And Peter saw clearly that sincere or not the motion to caution made sense.

For Sedgewick, in this demented state, had Hobson's choice—either fall to his death or continue the insane climb towards cables carrying 380,000 volts. One-way missions don't stand still and the swaying figure in blue pyjamas meant business.

The universal hypnosis caused Peter to hesitate. He saw Forbes peering through the viewfinder of the Bolex, heard the motor whirring, then looked in stunned amazement at Christina.

– And found himself face to face with a cold, indifferent *person* . . . the person she had been in that moment when the General had taken her off in the chopper. A chill, which had nothing to do with mountain air, escalated Peter's spine: for this person was a trapped person; and though he was in the trap with her it was as if they were both in it for opposite reasons, and all that had linked them had dispersed. There was only the wind in the wires, the buzzing of the cine camera, the mutterings of Sedgewick as he faltered on the slippery spars of steel overhead.

The issue of what to do was decided by the appearance, from the direction of the clinic, of an approaching group. They were nuns. Sedgewick saw them and lurched violently. There was only one course open now; and Peter kicked his skis away and climbed on up.

The moment Sedgewick saw Peter appear on the same level he uttered a cry and began to go higher. Even through gloves Peter found the metal of the tower-structure so cold it was almost impossible to grip. Yet he had to reach the next level before Sedgewick did . . . and Sedgewick had not got the mechanism to care. Close above, now, was the lower of the three electric wires on the west side. Sedgewick, still balancing crazily on the other, had further to go but there was still only six feet between him and electrocution. Peter had to get right across, somehow restrain him, without sliding off the thickly lumped ice himself.

Below – at a crazy distance now – was the dwarfed, gathering group, heads turned upward, hands over mouths. Christina looked away when Peter needed her reassurance most. Forbes was impassively filming the entire scene, as if this were some bizarre scientific experiment of which he was a dispassionate observer.

The terrible moment came. A word – some word unfamiliar to Peter but somehow very meaningful – escaped Sedgewick's frozen-blue lips. It was uttered as a hoarse cry, originating as if from the belly. In that second he seemed to recognize Peter.

Then he reached up for the spar above – and missed it. Catching the cable instead he became – literally – a fuse.

The sizzle of burning flesh and the scorch of a shorted high-tension circuit as the spark flashed down to the metalwork at Sedgewick's feet . . . The pyjamas ignited and Sedgewick fell like a flaming torch to the smashing-hard concrete base of the pylon, forty feet below.

The spectacle was so awful that nobody moved until Peter had clambered down. And even while Peter was crying off his tension, his head buried in Christina's breast, he realized he had forgotten that final word of Sedgewick's.

Seeking solace and reassurance, Peter looked up into Christina's eyes. For a moment there *was* something . . . the soft-loving maternal impulse that was still free. Then even that died and there was nothing. Christina wasn't there.

Later, while the nuns and ambulance men were picking up the charred body, Peter found himself exchanging a long, despairing look with the Chief Nun – actually the senior sister – and she at least was able to communicate.

Peter didn't know anything about nuns, but this nun, whose warm, unagitated manner seemed to bring calm where none was possible, made a firm, intuitive bond with Peter in that moment and evidently guessed a number of things. She saw Peter looking across at the grotesque building that was the clinic, then back at her enquiringly. He received back a very slight shake of the head. After saying a few things in German to the stretcher party, she came over, skilfully deflecting Peter away from Christina and the others. Even then she didn't open the conversation but waited for Peter to gambit if he so wished.

He said only: "May I see you?"

She said: "Seven. Here at the clinic. Speak to no one except me," – and shared Peter's deeply disturbed gaze as Forbes took Christina off in a churn-up of ski snow. From Forbes' shoulders was slung the cine camera – an incongruous holiday object that didn't belong with sudden death.

It was five minutes to seven when Peter drove to the clinic. It was snowing. The stuff mushed down on to previous falls and isolated the place. It flossed down lazily, biased obliquely by the slight breath of wind, in front of the solitary car-park light which stood on a high stanchion at one corner.

You could not see the high-tension wires overhead or the pylons which suspended them; but from somewhere came the unmistakable drone-note of main electricity buzzing in a transformer installation nearby.

The thing that hit you about this place was the odd separation of silence from sound. They seemed like two distinct commodities, neither encroaching on the other. Peter's padded footsteps took him in between snow-encrusted cottage loaves and each had its very slight electronic buzz. As you passed from one to the next, so one sort of buzz receded and another took its place. Between two of the buildings was a parked car. You could hear the clock ticking from the dash at a range of ten yards.

There were no people; and this conveyed the impression that you were intruding on something entirely alien which rendered you a trespasser. Peter couldn't fight this feeling off, found it an immense relief to find a building which at least had windows in it. He peered in.

This one was packed with electronic gear not normally associated with a hospital. Peter assumed it to have some neurological significance. He was right to the extent that a dim sign-board marked *Neurology* in four languages glowed faintly through the snow encrusting it. There was no sign of life in here, only the inscrutable equipment-racks. More conventionally, an X-ray room shared the floorspace of the building and there actually was a man in this section who was studying negatives in a ground-glass viewer. This could have been part of the autopsy on Sedgewick, for even Peter could see the damage to the rib-cage.

He took a path to the next building. The top surface of the snow

underfoot was gossamer-soft. Peter's shoes went straight through to the tightly packed snow underneath. He stopped by a curtained window. From here came the indiscernible mutter of male voices. Around the corner was the entrance to the clinic itself.

The interior hall conflicted oddly with the unpleasant architecture outside. It had the super-polished quality of a convent. At the far end stood an old clock and this chimed the hour as Peter wiped his feet prior to risking spotless linoleum. A wooden crucifix hung on the wall. There were flowers and a huge brass tray leaning against the pure-white emulsion paint behind the telephone table.

There was a call bell and Peter rang it. Immediately a rank-and-file nun in a grim black robe greeted him. Her smile was automatic, eyes unfriendly. She showed him into a scrubbed waiting room. Here, a shrub and another brass tray. No ashtrays. Peter used the shrub as he smoked and waited.

He was kept some time. From here he could make out the muttering voices he had heard from outside. He worked out that this waiting room was next door to the window from which he had heard them. To check this he pulled back a corner of the trim curtains and looked out, getting his bearings.

But just thick snow. The Hotel Randolf, with its finger cocktail bar, seemed a long way off now. Both in time and distance it was displaced. Peter's emotions, mercifully numbed and only welling from the stomach every now and then as if almost irrelevant to the issue, signalled the deep rift between now and before.

Merciful confusion was playing its part in lessening pain. The situation was too weird to convey full impact. Vaguely he recognized that he couldn't hope to remain immune from torment for long, was grateful for as long as it might last.

"You are in love," said Sister Theresa, as she entered.

"But not married," Peter said, and watched her eyes.

"No matter." The woman didn't smile patronizingly as if to forgive some unheard-of departure from proper human behaviour.

She was a serious woman who seemed in her way to be as troubled as he was; and on to her basically distressed mood she did not try to superimpose the jovial cheerfulness Peter had expected. This was person to person.

Speaking excellent English, with only that slight flattening of vowels associated with her more customary language, she said what she meant and was unbothered by Rome, which evidently trusted her. But she did grin slightly at a *No smoking* sign hotly pursued by a guilty shrug. "You'd better smoke," she said. "You'll talk better. They all use the shrub. I think perhaps that's what I put it there for."

"Thanks." He watched her, waited expectantly.

"What will you do now?"

"Do you want the answer with or without pride?"

"I would like the truth."

Peter's hand shook. "I shall go back to her hotel and talk her back."

"It's no use. I saw her eyes."

"My emotions probably won't accept that."

"I suppose not." For a moment Theresa betrayed her intense pity. Peter was grateful. The look did not reappear for the rest of the interview but he desperately needed it then.

Peter went on: "She won't go to him," – meaning John Forbes.

"You don't have to tell me that. May I talk more generally?"

He smiled. "I think we'd better."

"Good. How many of these people do you know?"

He was surprised. "'These people'?"

"You know what I mean."

"I didn't realize many people knew about them."

"They don't," she said. "And if you tried to tell them, they wouldn't accept their existence. Did you know the deceased man?"

"Slightly. Purely in business."

She nodded. "What happened? Do you know?"

"He was a ladies' man who suddenly lost his touch. He was informed of this problem rather suddenly, in the middle of the night, by his secretary, who seemed to think she had almost lost hers. There was also an episode to do with crossed lines the previous night."

"I wouldn't have thought that was enough. Would you?"

"No. Sedgewick was pretty normal in all obvious respects. In fact, he was fondly implying I had a persecution complex until all too recently."

"Pot calling the kettle black?" asked Theresa.

Suddenly Peter burst out with: "Sister, for God's sake tell me what's happening! Am I mad, or are they? Am I simply blaming *them*! . . . *them*! . . . *them*! – because I can't make out with a girl friend?"

Theresa said nothing for a long time. Then she rose, went to the window, stared at the snow as he had. "It's very difficult for me," she said. "It would be wrong for me to concern myself with your private life, to mix this up with anything else. Your love affair is God's concern – one way or the other – and not mine. My instinct is that you regard your own sexual attitudes as a kind of antidote to whatever unholy thing it is that these people – *them* – are doing and believing and forcing upon the world. Naturally I do not accept this."

"Sister, there is a difference between abstention and incapacity."

She turned. "Yes . . . that's perfectly true. But although I do not in the least question your own moralities they are by definition different from mine. You therefore must not expect me to identify with the dynamics of the situation as you see them in that respect —"

"– Naturally not."

" – *However*," she said with emphasis and as if uninterrupted, "I find myself in a situation which commands that I take sides. And quite frankly, whereas I find you amoral but not immoral, I find this . . . *them* . . . a positive evil. In that sense, at least, we are allies. In the next room," she continued, without a break, "is a highly respected consultant psychiatrist. For the last half-hour he has been in discussion with a man called Verolde."

Peter glanced up sharply. "I know him."

Theresa digested this. "You will probably sense that I know very little about this . . . this strange new world they are creating, and this is perfectly true – I don't. But I would like to ask you a question which might bear on what knowledge you may have: of the people you actually know or have met, who would you say was the 'leader' of the group?"

Peter looked up at her as if the question presented no problem. "Why, Verolde."

"Yes, I thought that when I met him."

"Has he been here before, then?"

"He's a friend of Dr Moyen's."

"That's the name of the psychiatrist?"

"Yes."

"A psychiatrist mixed up in a thing like this?"

She said: "You have to remember that this 'thing like this' is merely an abstract sensation we both have. They haven't done anything wrong. We aren't talking about criminals."

"But isn't a psychiatrist supposed to know what is going on in his own mind?"

She smiled. "I know they're the new supermen but they're all different. Some are good, some not. But what has happened to the mind of Dr Moyen could happen to anybody. In effect, it's simply that he believes in something that is different from what you and I share, whatever our other differences. To him, you see, we're totally redundant."

"Does he know you feel this way?"

"No. And he mustn't. And after this interview (for he knows you are here) I shall tell him you are sick. That is vital. I am sorry."

"No . . . I completely understand." Peter added: "But about Verolde? Is there someone over him?"

She said emphatically: "There is no one over him, or under him, except in business. You must clear all such concepts from your mind, Mr Shackleton. Stop thinking of a great orchestra with its conductor on the rostrum. Think rather of a jazz band, the members of which are many miles apart, out of earshot – and yet perfectly in time and in tune with each other."

"What links them?"

"That is something you might know. I don't. But look . . ."

She drew back the curtain with what seemed an angry, passionate jerk. The snow had thinned. You could clearly see the other building, and the electronic equipment visible through plain windows. Red lights glowed sullenly on the sleek cabinets. Theresa said: "There is no leader, Mr Shackleton. There is a *Progress* . . . which is simply not the same as your progress, or mine."

Leaving the curtains wide apart, she returned and sat down, mentally turning over a page and resuming a more practical tone. "I shall need to know where to find you."

"The Freid Institute, in Exeter."

"Exeter in England?"

"Yes."

"I do not know of this institute. What does it do?"

"I can only guess: it does the opposite of what these people do."

She got up. "I shall remember," she said.

On seeing Peter to the door she glanced at the Citroën and smiled reminiscently. "Oh, I see we have a mutual friend. Why is it I have such a weakness for such dreadful sinners?"

Peter grinned back as he started the engine. "That's a very expensive pub," he said, thinking of the bill at the Schweizerhof.

"I know," said Theresa. "But avarice is by no means the only sin of its proprietor!"

Chapter Seven

THE proprietor of the Schweizerhof shrugged rounded shoulders and said: "Mr Shackleton, did you realize I knew in advance what would happen?" He gestured lavishly. "What to say? What to do? Impossible position that I am in."

"How did you know?"

He pointed to his ample stomach. "In here I feel it. In here I feel everything. The hotel business rotates round the human stomach. It is – how you say? – the centre of the universe. I *feel*, you see." He pushed both their drinks across the bar-top, sipped at his. "What will you do?"

"I shan't try going up to the Randolf again."

"It is," agreed the proprietor, "a lousy hotel."

"That wasn't what I meant . . . The recurring brush-off can be tedious."

"Did you see Verolde up there?"

"How do you know Verolde?"

"Because he is rich. This is the thing. If they are rich," he explained, "then I know them . . . And without even consulting my stomach I can tell you that this Verolde will be on the Swissair flight to London tonight. Do you wish the direct confrontation?"

"Oh, yes," said Peter grimly, "I wish the direct confrontation."

Thin streams of reading-light lasered from the roof of the plane, piercing blue cigarette smoke and illuminating individuals who slumped like basking seals in tepid blue upholstery. Jaws hanging open, the sleepers lolled and rolled with the slight motion of the aircraft. Others flipped through magazines and Thought Big. Below, some city glimmered . . . the first visible since Zurich and the takeoff.

The pretty stewardess, who knew which of the Big Thinking regulars fancied themselves heterosexually, kept out of whisky-

breath range and swung her bottom well clear of the compulsive pinchers. She did, however, lean right across the empty seat next to Peter when he ordered a drink. They mutually telegraphed an imaginary love affair and shared a grimace about tycoons in general. For Verolde was aboard, as predicted. And Peter didn't have to seek his company. For now the big man came and sat in the seat next to him. After-shave lotion and all that.

For a while Verolde sat silent. Peter observed him as through a portcullis. He thought, '*you aren't real. I can't place myself inside your mind and be you. There is no mind. You merely function.*'

And Verolde seemed suddenly to switch on. "Nobody wins," he said in his sludgy Americanized voice, "do they? That guy Sedgewick. He met you and you met him and now he's dead."

"Do you care?"

Verolde burst out laughing. Several people near by were disturbed. No one complained but someone snapped a lightswitch. It was an articulate protest. Verolde said: "What *has* that to do with you? There's something basically sanctimonious about the way you go around making snap judgements – then blaming everybody for doing exactly what you expect them to do. No . . . I don't particularly care about Sedgewick. He was weak. Just *how* weak . . . well, you saw."

"That isn't what you sat down here to talk about. Why do you want to take over my ridiculous company? . . . What use is Forbes–Shackleton, of all things, to you?"

Verolde seemed amused. "I seem to offend you in most things and I guess what I'm going to say now won't help. But a better question might be: What made you go into business, Shackleton? You're honest in all the wrong ways. And yet dishonest in the way you delude yourself. You have the naivety of the small fry, and the pompousness of a missionary. They do not go well together."

"Then why do you feel it necessary to talk to me at all?"

Verolde slapped his thigh, grinning. "I knew it! I *knew* it! It's just exactly like pressing a button on a machine and getting the *tilt* sign! Young fellow, I only feel it necessary for *you*! This David and Goliath game you're playing is getting you laughed at, even by the girl you keep pestering and won't leave alone. Maybe at times she *is* impressed by your goody-goody-ness – well, I have to hand

it to you: you certainly can keep it up! You have the profound dedication of the offbeat screwball and with it you confuse people until they do exactly what you want. Finally they see through it, and you get hurt.

"Take my advice: Stop it. Sell your little company and – if you want – stay on the board. You can continue your lone operations in full view of those whom you regard as the enemy. But I do assure you, there is none – only in your own mind."

Peter said calmly: "You just tell me why you manipulate people and I'll consider your proposition seriously."

Another smile. "I'm not sure it amounts to a serious proposition for such ponderous deliberations but we'll skip that." He rang for the stewardess. "We'll 'ponder' over a drink. After a couple of scotches – who knows? – you might feel less ponderous. Then my mission will have been well worth while. Because I don't want to be driven to making you look even more ridiculous than you do already."

The girl came up. Peter had to hand it to her. She made no secret of her distaste for Verolde, who had given her no tangible reason for annoyance other than by being Verolde. But the tycoon boomed a tycoon order and picked up: "You say I manipulate people. Well, yes! – if they're open to manipulation and I need something, sure, I manipulate them. And so does everyone else. And so do you. How else do people operate, get what they want? If you choose to take stone-age weapons to modern technology – apparently for the sake of proving you can hold out against it – then I'll reply with superior weapons – all of them legal."

"And ethical?"

Verolde's habitual smile came once more. "You know? – I could feel the aircraft *heave* with the loading of that question?" He snapped a lighter. "Society takes care of its own ethics but – haven't you noticed? – ethics never seem to interfere with what that society wants. If they did, then we really *would* be swallowed up by the machinery you seem to fear so much. Control systems – like the one which automates that dam in Stradt – don't know about ethics. They just go right ahead with what they have to do. You can't impose an artificial code – and any code which can't possibly work in the circumstances is meaningless. Am I right?"

"You're presupposing majority rule, like the ants."

"And I'm right to. I'll tell you for why." He pulled hard at a cigarette, blew smoke with gratification. "Because, however much you may fight it, you are just a statistic. So am I. At present, I'm a bigger statistic than you are. That doesn't make me fundamentally different, or immoral, or anything emotional at all. Emotions and statistics do not go together. They jam the machine."

Peter said: "Your emotions are the only possessions you have which are superior to the machine."

"Sure! So I keep my emotions out of the mechanism. That way I can think." He beamed. "Unlike your termites."

The stewardess arrived with the drinks. Verolde took his without looking at her or interrupting what he was saying. The girl gave Peter another promising stare as he took his. Peter said, "thanks." Verolde went on: "What bugs me is the waste. Your knowledge – your inventiveness – in the matter of electronics could be valuable." He held up his hand, anticipating hysterical protest. "So don't tell me: you're not interested! I know that! I know something else, too. I know that you tried to get into a certain university in the States. There, you flaunted your individualism as if no one else was an individual. What happens? You get a series of tests. Do you do them? – do you objectively respond as you are meant to respond, in order to reveal a perfectly adequate intelligence level?

"I know that you do *not* respond. The testing organization which formulated them happens to be partly mine. Corrupt, is it? Unethical, maybe? Well surely, there must be *something* wrong with it? After all, 'testing' is big business. It involves people like me. So what do *you* do, Shackleton? You prove – conclusively – that your emotions are standing in the way of your intellect. You prove that, in refusing to answer simple questions, prepared by a host of experts in psychology, then tested exhaustively on a scientific basis until it is damn well *certain* that each question stands up, in refusing to choose each right answer you prefer to rebel." Round came the electronic eyes. "Those questions are *designed*, Shackleton, to sift out the paranoid types. We don't want them. They were useful, the paranoids, in pioneering days . . . but who's pioneering now? We need solid brains and integrated minds and reasonable attitudes. What you showed, by your angry – sometimes facetious – comments scrawled all over the

paper (I took the trouble to have the papers sent over and I've seen them for myself) . . . what you showed was not that you *are* an individual, but that you're scared of *not* being one."

Peter smiled slightly, then drew out the envelope Stranger had sent. Unfolding the contents, he said: "I'm just scared of injustice. Supposing those tests of yours don't work? – supposing they penalize people with the initiative to think up answers of their own? – answers which don't fit the tramlines laid down by the computers you use to mark the results?"

"What have you there, Peter Pan? Found your own shadow, at last? Maybe that's what you've really been looking for all the time!"

Remembering a previous encounter, Peter knew he had to let this one pass. Calmly he said: "It's just that I thought I'd throw you a test, this time. It wasn't among those you hand out but it can't make a bigger monkey out of you than yours do out of the candidates."

"Okay; amuse yourself, my friend."

"It goes like this, Mr Verolde: *Which of the following is the nearest to the truth:*" He broke off. "Do you want to write this down?"

Verolde pulled a resigned face. "If you say it's necessary," – fumbling for a bit of paper. "Shoot."

"*Which of the following is the nearest to the truth:* (*a*) George Verolde is convinced that he can always stop the machinery by hitting the panic button . . ."

Verolde looked up momentarily, grinning like an ape being offered a banana. Then he wrote it down and nodded. "I have that. Next?"

Peter wasn't smiling. "(*b*) George Verolde has convinced himself that he can always stop the machinery by hitting the panic button."

"Hey – wait a minute!"

"What's the matter, Mr Verolde?"

"The question's ambiguous. We do not know how honest this George Verolde is with himself. If he is completely honest then he has convinced himself only because it is a fact. If he is not honest then it is fantasy and he is wrong. The question fails to contain the necessary information."

Peter said: "But you failed to see that Question (*a*) is even more ambiguous."

"I don't see that."

"Your psychological experts wouldn't either. They would take it as read that he was convinced because of his own convictions. But think of it as part of another sentence: George Verolde, who is ignorant, has consulted the technician; and as a result George Verolde is convinced that he can stop the machinery by hitting the panic button. It is now a less obvious statement than (*b*) and means something entirely different."

Verolde said uneasily: "It's a quibble, but go on with (*c*)."

"George Verolde, being ignorant, and having consulted the technician, knows that if he hits the panic button he may stop the machinery."

"Well, that at least is obvious. The faulty word is 'may'. It could mean that he 'may choose to or may not', or it could mean 'is enabled'."

Peter smiled delicately. "No, Mr Verolde. It is not obvious. The word 'if' followed by the word 'may' means only one thing. It means absolutely nothing at all. By pressing the panic button George Verolde is already committed to whatever the panic button does. There's no 'may' about it in whichever sense you mean, for the sequence of events is already in action and there is no choice. The sentence should read: '. . . having consulted the technician, knows that he may press the panic button in order to stop the machinery.' Am I right?"

"So what does that prove?"

"That you, at least, despite your millions and your grasp of modern technology, are incapable of seeing obvious flaws in a multiple choice test."

Verolde finished his drink. "I contend that the flaw lies in the questions."

Peter laughed at him. "Which is exactly what I wrote across your paper."

Peter got up to go aft. London in twenty minutes and a pause to wash – as also to leave Verolde in a state of discomfort.

Coming out of the little lavatory Peter found himself in perfume range of the Swiss stewardess. She brushed against him and Peter said: "How about afterwards?"

She looked down. "I have a return flight."

"Pity."

The girl intimated that this was so.

Verolde hadn't finished with Peter. He had watched Peter's brief exchange with the girl, now smiled to himself for revenge-value. Aloud, he said: "So were you expecting me to take your 'test' seriously, Shackleton?"

"Of course not. I thought I made it clear that such a test could never be taken seriously . . .? Yours or mine."

Verolde laughed coarsely. "Mr Shackleton, you really shouldn't try to anger me. I do not share your personal nightmares." He got up and turned for the wash-room, but couldn't resist: "Save them, Peter Pan! Or your bedwetting will foul-up the machinery once and for all." With this he strolled down the gangway.

After touchdown Peter was leaving the terminal building when he happened to see the stewardess climbing into a very large car.

With Verolde.

This, then, was to be a desolate night . . . a night to kick heels and indulge in that vital human function known as self-pity. It was a night in which every half-spun sentence in the head began "if only . . ." and both were faulty words.

It was a night for getting out the car and planning on going to some club, but somehow the bar was too full or too empty but maybe the next one . . .? And finally the issue was decided only by the clock, which indicated that all of them must by now be closed.

Only then did the real thoughts start ticking, sluggishly and only somewhere at the back of his mind.

Thus it was a surprise for Peter to find he had pulled up outside the TRAX computer centre in Soho.

Peter, familiar enough with computer equipment and especially with the products of TRAX, paused by the window and idly gazed at the view. He watched the jump-tapes in the glass-fronted cabinets as twin spools suddenly jerked into action and then, equally suddenly, became motionless. There were sixteen of these visible, arranged in sleek lines at either end of the display.

Usually, there were several men on the job, checking printouts and supervising the control cabinets themselves – great, grey-

metal things with handsome lines of disarming simplicity. Sometimes the equipment worked through millions of arithmetical steps unaided; and such a program was evidently in hand now. Empty coffee cups signified that human aid wasn't far distant; but the desk positions were deserted and the flickering lights all over the system – above the jump-tapes and on the suave panels of the cabinets and on the aesthetically pleasing control consoles bedecked with coloured telephones – signalled strictly for their own benefit.

Outside, the street was dark and deserted and very cold. The grimy exterior of a wholesale furniture store opposite showed its chintz settees only by the light of the streetlamp. Further down, a cosily-stuccoed Italian restaurant offered stacked tables and chairs visible through a steamed-up window. Hollowly fluting down the road the echo of thinned-out traffic proved that main-street London was very much alive.

There were two things which gradually penetrated through to Peter's intuition and told him that all was not quite normal. The realization came gradually, as in one of those puzzle-pictures when just one or two things are very slightly wrong . . . a table with one unmatching leg; a light-fitting with no flex; a car with no number plate.

The first was that some of the equipment on show wasn't of the usual "mark". There were modifications . . . not obvious ones, but changes nevertheless. Alerted, Peter took a more detailed look; and in doing so gauged that instead of the expected data-processing gear there were installed, in some of the positions, units more like the control systems you might expect to find in the computer room of an automated system for some industrial process like the packing, conveying, and sorting of some product or the regulation of a thing like a power station or an optimized railway shunting yard, where the whole business of moving trains about might be reduced to the minimum possible number of movements.

The other thing was more ominous.

Because Peter saw that the motions of the jump-tapes and the displays of light-indicators were synchronized with his own movements in the street.

There was no doubt about it. If he walked to one side, a definite computation resulted. Backward or forward, and the machine followed suit with some kind of response. Cough, or say some-

thing, and a more elaborate sequence of events occurred inside the window. This – hideously – could only mean one thing.

So Peter started searching for the inevitable television camera and microphone to which the computer must be linked. During this, a car drove down the street and the noisy occupants, rattling off Italian, decanted themselves into the street, clearly heading for the murky flat over the restaurant.

To reach the flat they would clearly have to pass the TRAX window.

Peter crossed to the other side of the street, to see what happened when they passed it. From here he could still see what happened within the window.

Peter felt helplessly detached from everyday life because the little scene was so human and alive. A pretty girl, pony-tail flapping on her shoulders, ran ahead laughing while her young pursuer called after her with some flattering badinage. An older couple – clearly her parents – followed further behind, smiling slightly and chatting to each other about the courtship going on ahead. As they approached the TRAX window the young man caught the girl and held her and they both laughed like children playing. They reached the window, displaying no interest at all in its stolidly technical contents.

And nothing happened. Not a tape moved. Not a light flashed.

The equipment waited, insidiously selective in its arithmetic.

Extrovert parents caught up with the couple, stood silhouetted against the window, waggled parental fingers authoritatively, as if saying: "Not sleep with each other! Behave and wait!"

The equipment showed nil interest. All tapes stationary. The printers, capable of thrashing out thousands of words per second on whirring rolls of perforated-edge paper, did not perform their clattering antics to keep up with any silent, electronic pulses inside the cabinets.

Peter watched the cheerful little group as the Italians crossed to his side of the street, where he stood in the semi-darkness of the furniture store. The girl caught sight of him and reacted oddly, as if he were some unhealthy-minded loiterer. Then she passed him and was laughing again. The young man opened the side door of the restaurant and the rest of the family followed him in. Peter could still hear the two youngsters crashing up uncarpeted stairs as the

chase continued behind locked doors. Lights came on above. Then there was silence.

Peter crossed the street again to the computer window. The electronic activities broke out once more.

The bottom edge of the long window ran along the pavement roughly waist-high. Under it were some apertures, like ventilation intakes.

Peter struck a match in front of one of these.

The equipment froze into immobility.

But Peter could see, set well back in the hollow, the unmistakable gloss of a convex lens. He struck another one and moved slightly left. The lens pivoted, following him.

His heart thumping, Peter moved about within the lens's arc, trying to see if there was human supervision. Negative. He could hear, very faintly, the whirr of an electric motor.

The sneaky thing was working itself; and in the next vent but one was a microphone.

This, then, was "bugging" with a difference. The chill of it got hold of his spine and the street felt darker and colder than before.

The computer *knew* he was there.

Unfriendly stars were fading from the early morning sky as Peter entered the Forbes–Shackleton office.

There, he brewed up some coffee and opened a can of Marvel – then found the letter.

Postmarked Exeter, it was from Richard Stranger.

All it said was:

Come when you're ready.

Chapter Eight

THE long stretch of water, seen from this viewpoint on the bridge, opened and closed, then opened and closed again, as lakes which had once been separate narrowed to converging points between the bulges. At the necks, the reservoir was shrouded by edging trees, where Forestry Commission plantations lined-down from wavy hills. There was a kind of peace about it.

Stranger said nothing to Peter until they had clanged to the far side of the steel bridge. Then, heading towards a tiny group of cottages, all whitewalled and then thatched above, he asked: "Did you tell anyone at all you were coming here?"

"No."

"Good."

Peter said: "I could have been followed."

Stranger paused, standing by a bright red, newly-painted telephone box. It caught the sunlight and looked like a clean new toy. But the bright effect of the hamlet to which it belonged, built on the steep slope folding down to the water, was able to compete with the scarlet because the rest of the paintbox had also been put to use. Neat, pale-blue window frames, picked out against the white wattle, and ridiculously green trees overlapping the country lane, warm rich yellow/orange of thick thatch . . . all this child-innocence of simple colour knit the eyescape together and made it a whole. The sepia of Cornwall had been much different; it was as if that county, lying further west than this, had had its colours blown away by the sharp Atlantic winds. But down here, in the valley, not so very far from Exeter and the estuary, valley-shelter had left proud paint intact.

"They don't do that," said Stranger, and led on. "Verolde wasn't following you when he left for Switzerland. He had to go there anyway. They don't do that because they never admit to

their own motives; and they don't admit to them because they don't really know them."

Peter followed on up the hill, letting Stranger stride slightly ahead as he obviously wanted to. "But surely they must know."

Stranger shook his head. "Not the real motive, though. That would be – according to their minds – to protect the interests of Forbes–Shackleton . . . subsidiary-to-be of TRAX. You can't be trusted. You're a crackpot, like me."

They stopped at one of the cottages. The moustache moved comically upward as Stranger pushed on the unlocked cottage door. "Come on in."

"You live here?"

"Sort of."

"What a frightful mess."

"Always."

"Yet I bet you know exactly where everything is?"

"That," said Stranger, heaving some papers out of the way, "is merely the myth of the eccentric. They live in a muddle and protest that they can always put their hands on anything — blindfold. Well . . . I can't think why anyone should want to go about blindfold in the first place. And in the second place they're not so much eccentric as lazy, like myself. Fat Mrs Jemison will be in to make tea in a minute. Fat Mrs Jemison will come in and stare at it all and she will heave her enormous breasts and will say: 'If you don't tidy up, Mr Stranger, I shall leave.' . . . Sit down, if you can find somewhere to sit. On the whole it's easier than standing up, because of ceiling trouble."

Peter understood ceiling trouble. It was so low that you had to stoop the whole time. Stranger, taller than him, had acquired a permanent stoop. Peter could stand erect with only his hair touching.

But you had to remember where the beams were.

"Did that hurt?"

Peter held on to his temper. "As a matter of fact, yes."

"It takes ten very hard bangs, I find, before anyone really remembers. Concussion is part of the acclimatization. There's no short cut, I'm afraid. You must do it ten times."

Later, Fat Mrs Jemison came in to make tea, and said "If you don't tidy up, Mr Stranger, I shall *really* go this time. Why don't

you let me clear up that 'bominable rubbish?" She didn't wait for an answer but bulged her way into the kitchen and then bulged back again with the tea. The biscuits were soft and very old. Then Fat Mrs Jemison creaked stairboards and banged about upstairs with a broom. The thumps of the broom lasted through the conversation, as did Stranger's chain-smoking. He lit new cigarettes disgustingly from old butts which he hurled into a fireplace already stacked with like debris.

"Now, sir. Your duties. The Freid Institute is a self-sufficient unit and your contribution will be as follows . . ." He referred to some notes scrawled on the back of a dinner menu from Exeter University. "You will be responsible for the emergency lighting plant which is in a filthy state because hitherto that's been my task. We have iron-lung cases (you'll realize why in due course) so we mustn't be without electricity. You will service the electronic equipment up in the lab," – he pointed through the window up the steep hill opposite the reservoir, – "where Ham Nichols does mostly analytical work. He's only a millionaire and therefore is a bit of a novice but shows promise. You will, so far as is humanly possible, make our transport work. This consists of my terrible old Chevvy, Dr Williams' station wagon, and Ham's 1968 supermatic, ultra-deluxe, hypervulgar American motor car – which is, in reality, the only one that goes. Okay so far?"

"I think I can manage those. Where am I accommodated?"

"In this cottage with me."

"So where and what is the Freid Institute itself?"

"It's here. In these cottages. And up on the hill, as you will later see. On the hill is the hotel; and the hotel is connected by a sort of glass corridor to Ham's lab. The lab used to be the pumping station for the reservoir. They have a new one, now, the other end . . . were you expecting one of those huge concrete skyscrapers full of experts? No, don't be embarrassed. It's quite natural. But here we are not experts. We are starting at the beginning. It is the only way."

"Who was Freid?"

"He wasn't. Dr Williams was ordering stationery and it was a bad line. He mentioned Ide, a village near here. The printer misheard him. We had to be called something: so why not the Freid? – end of story."

Peter grinned. "It seems you don't exactly go in for organization."

Stranger's mouth shut tight like a trap. He looked very grim then: "Correct. We hate it. Attached to us is a small farm. You will find no electric milking machines and the cream separator is turned by hand. You'd be surprised what fun it is, just turning it. . But the press call us eccentric. What a superb smoke-screen Nobody takes us seriously. Thus we can continue our work unmolested. We are not concerned with our image, you see."

"What's the hotel for?"

Stranger walked restlessly across the room. "The hotel was the Beginning." He gazed up through the gathering darkness at the building on the hill. "To understand the Beginning you have to know about the Trek. Or have you guessed already?" He digressed and said: "She's having a great time with that broom, isn't she . . .? Fat Mrs Jemison thinks we think too much. She feels we should all go for long walks and forget our troubles. The loud broom is to break up the party. Tell me what you've guessed about the Trek."

Peter said: "It seems to imply refugees."

"Absolutely right. But from what?"

"Over-organization? Rejects, perhaps, of the Electronic Revolution . . .?"

Stranger looked particularly pleased. "You have been doing some genuine thinking. What we don't know is why they chose a particular route and direction . . . Almost by the same sort of instinct as migrating birds. Probably we never will know."

"How many of them?"

"Just dribs and drabs – as yet."

Peter glanced across. "So you're expecting more?"

"Well, aren't you one of them? – in a way?"

"But I'm —"

" – You're going to say that you're technically qualified as an electronics engineer so why should you run away . . .? Something like that? You're an unusual case. You're not ill yourself. It's your girl who is the real victim. And whatever they want her for, you scared them."

"*Them* again! It's a word I find myself using. It's a word Sister Theresa kept using. What's it mean, in the context?"

Stranger had reached the door. "I wonder if their victims might help you understand . . .? Yes, Peter, I think the Trekkers will

help. But I warn you, when you see them you will be angry – with me."

"Why?"

Stranger looked at him hard, then opened the creaky old front door. "Well, wasn't it you who said that Musiconics was like a zoo? Unfortunately, the human inmates were fed on electronics. You are about to see what happens to them after a serious overdose."

"But why is it you I should be angry with?"

"Because nobody here knows the antidote – yet. That always makes people rather unpopular . . . *mind that beam!* . . . Oh, never mind. That's one more step towards remembering it forever."

They left the cottage for the hill, which was really only a short, steep rise marked by a hairpin bend in the lane. Trees concealed most of what lay up there; but Peter saw something looming high overhead and this suddenly seemed to add up. He said: "That pylon . . . Anything to do with the Trek route?"

Stranger answered without looking: "As I said, you have been doing some genuine thinking. The answer is we don't know; and when we don't know, we don't jump to fantastic conclusions. But keep asking things like that . . . intuition is for ringing bells, and I can hear them quite distinctly in the distance." Stranger paused at a division in the footpath.

Peter said: "Aren't you coming in?"

Stranger said firmly: "You take a look in the hotel on your own. I'll be in with Ham, in the lab. We'll meet in there afterwards."

The lab referred to was now ahead. Peter could see clearly its origins – having once been a pumping station it still showed signs of giant plumbing . . . now sawn-off, as it were – and it had that stocky appearance, the nationally famous hideousness of buildings put up in the twenties by the Ministry of Works. The muddle of conversion from waterworks to laboratory brought the conflicts thick upon one another; for that humming noise (as Stranger said) came from the electrical transformer which fed the whole village with main supply.

The sky had darkened rapidly and it had got colder. The buzz from the transformer room was the only sound out here, but Peter thought he heard voices coming faintly from the hotel. The richness of pine floated on a very slight wind from the forest. It

conflicted with the stark, cold geometry of the pylon which, like a pagan totem, formed a marker on the scene.

At first all he could see was the screen of a faltering tee-vee set which dominated the foyer of the hotel. The bluish-white glow penetrated the big glass windows and illuminated vaguely the furnishings in and around what had probably been the actual reception desk when the place really had been in use as a hotel. A broken glass sign proclaimed its splintered message "CEPTION" and hung near the set.

The television picture was rolling upwards in jerky convulsions; but the sound was working, and this was the source of the voices Peter had heard.

He pushed open the glass doors and went in.

The volume of the set had been turned up fully, and the brittle voices of participants in some discussion programme echoed around the walls.

The harsh sound was as startling for its aggressiveness as were the figures Peter saw in the armchairs for their immobility.

The faces of the "viewers", erratically lit by the flashes from the cathode ray tube on the set, formed the most terrifying study in inertia Peter had ever witnessed. The heads were in various attitudes of weird despondency, the eyes unfocused and misaligned. It was impossible not to be fascinated and at the same time terrorized by this insane spectacle.

A dagger of fear sharpened itself against the base of Peter's spine, sending a shock-current right the way up till the back of his neck tingled with a curious weightlessness, as if there were a hole in it. But he managed to move at last, crossing the room in swift, carefully disciplined strides and ending up by the desk. There was, of course, no one in attendance; but he found a set of light switches and the appropriate lamps came on. Then he walked to where the television set stood, and snapped off the switch.

Nobody had moved . . . or at least, so he thought.

He decided to take a closer look at one of the demented figures. To do so he had to cross the floor area in front of the tee-vee and as he did this his foot struck something. It was an empty can – beer, or spaghetti or whatever – and it rolled across the floor until with a clatter it struck another one and stopped.

But these were not the only ones. Rubble and litter were in profusion. The dereliction was everywhere . . . on chairs, tables, the floor.

Peter approached a man in the chair nearest the set. He was breathing, he was technically alive. The pupils of his eyes responded, though sluggishly, when Peter held his hands over them and then took them away again. His lips moved, making a faint, groaning sound.

Peter fought panic. He was an engineer. Any phenomenon had to have an explanation. Even this one. Why had Stranger let it go on? What was he trying to prove? Already Peter, forgetting Stranger's last words, felt a rising fury against him. This had to be an epidemic of some kind. Why let it develop – into this?

He walked to a girl who sat not far away from the man. She might have been pretty, one time . . . Southern-Italian . . . vaguely like someone Peter had recently seen but could not place. Now she had the face of a death mask, yet was not dead. The lids of her eyes were three parts closed. Hazel-black eyes with great enormous pupils.

Peter took her pulse. It was strong but – even to his inexpert touch – remarkably slow. Her breathing was shallow, sudden, sharp; then long gaps between volleys of breaths. Her hand moved slightly. Was she conscious of his presence? He wasn't quite sure.

It was at that point that Peter responded to his subconscious alertness. He had felt, at the moment when he had switched off the set, that there was in fact human movement somewhere, but couldn't then see what it was. He must have seen it – then perhaps intuitively rejected it – from the corner of his eye at that point.

Now something in his brain permitted him to observe it.

This was human movement yes; but was the movement human?

There was a man, not unlike Sedgewick to look at, so he might perhaps have had executive status. Part of that status would have been a telephone . . . and Peter was hideously reminded of the manner in which Sedgewick had answered his.

Here, now, was that manner taken to insanity-point.

For this man sat at a table near the desk. On the table was a telephone. And what was happening was particularly obscene because it came so close to being funny.

In an endless repetitive cycle – so that you could begin de-

scribing it from no matter which point – he would reach out his hand, in an authoritative flourish, and pick up the receiver. Putting it to his ear he would then start to dial.

But as soon as his index finger found the requisite hole, he withdrew his hand rapidly and put the receiver down again, swinging face-front in the swivel chair.

Immediately after this, with no pause at all, he began again; swivelling around with precisely the same gesture, picking up the receiver, attempting to dial, hanging up, swivelling back again . . . .

Hypnotized, Peter stood rooted and gazed at the consequences of an unheard-of illness that seemed to hold his own brain suspended.

It wasn't till Stranger, who had entered quietly behind him, touched his shoulder and then drew him gently back, that Peter could disengage his own mind from the horror before him.

"A form of ataxia," said Stranger quietly. "An endless loop is formed because the information he imagines that is coming back conflicts with the actions he takes to cope with it." Peter stared at Stranger as the man went on coolly: "That telephone call, the one that connects with nobody, which is never completed, and yet which has to be made, is probably the last despairing effort he can make . . . in order to communicate."

"But . . . does he *never* stop?"

"Never. He sleeps – in a sense. Then, it goes on still . . . but in slow motion."

Peter gazed, helplessly, down at the tin cans that littered the floor. He looked down at them, because he couldn't bring himself to look up at the remnants of those who had once been people. Finally he rapped out furiously at Stranger: "But how could you have let it get like this? It's inhuman!"

Stranger was not roused. Sounding almost detached he said: "I knew you'd react that way. And of course I am glad. To be outraged is a good start. I spent quite a lot of the time being outraged – at first."

Stranger paced, very slowly, as he talked. He carefully avoided the cans. "Dr Williams found them like this. It happened really by chance. This place *was* a hotel, then. The staff left. All he found were . . . the guests." He crossed to the Italian-looking

girl. "A month ago we had to teach her to breathe again – in an iron lung. She'd forgotten how. It was being done for her." He looked straight at Peter. "Programmed, you see."

"Programmed! Are you saying? —"

"I'm saying nothing. The fatal thing for me to do at this stage is to make it all sound simple – it isn't. You've got to learn slowly. Otherwise, how can you believe it? It was a long time before I did. That's why I sent you in here – alone. To get the first impact entirely to yourself. That is essential."

The executive man continued his executive telephone call. The rest remained still. Stranger surveyed them sadly, then said: "All you need know, at this point, is this . . ." For some reason he went to the set and turned it on again. Then he switched out the lights of the foyer. The scene was as before when the picture, still slipping as it had done, dimly lighted the place fluorescently. "What is left of their ability to think and act for themselves is very precious to them . . . more precious than you could conceivably imagine. We can only help them in ways they don't really notice. And believe it or not, they *can* 'notice' things . . . if only on a deeply unconscious level. On this level they can also suffer; the cliché that the mentally afflicted don't suffer just isn't true. We merely cling to it because it makes us feel better. So . . ." He crossed to the first man Peter had stared at, the one who had groaned in that fearful, stifled way. "Yes . . . ways they don't notice. Like trying to make sure the place doesn't smell. Just occasionally . . ." and here he paused, as if for a second having to fight his emotions, "just once in a while, one of these people will get up and go to the set and try to adjust the picture. It costs them, in terms of effort, what it might take you or me to cross the Sahara Desert, with rocks on our shoulders, on foot. There is no greater triumph, for them, than such an effort." He took out a cigarette and Peter desperately regretted his former rage because, even now, Stranger could not entirely master his grief. "Likewise," he said huskily, "there is no greater triumph, either for Dr Williams or for Ham Nichols or for me, when we find them doing it."

. . . And for some reason, this was the moment when Peter recalled, vividly, Sedgewick's last moments of thwarted life in the freezing wind of Stradt.

In his mind's eye he saw him clearly straddling the cross-

member of the pylon, playing his crazy game of Statues and thereby impersonating the stature of the pylon itself.

And he recalled – at last – the word that Sedgewick had muttered, over and over, through lips frozen by cold and sickness.

So Peter turned to Stranger and experimented.

Watching for Stranger's reaction, he uttered the word now.

"Servex," he said. And waited.

And Stranger snapped right out of his moroseness.

"Yes," he said, smiling a little. There seemed fresh hope in his eyes. "I was frightened it might have been shut off from you. That would have meant . . ." He broke off, then led the way out of that appalling place.

The night air seemed uniquely clean. Cleaner than any air in Peter's life experience. "It's time," said Stranger, "that we talked detail – about the collective organism known as Servex."

Peter nodded thoughtfully as the glass door swung to on the victims. "Funny . . . giving *them* a name makes a difference. Something you can fight."

Part Two

HANDS

Chapter Nine

SUCCESSFUL nuns are like successful generals: they have simple, incisive minds. Sister Theresa, watchful of her colleagues and subordinates of the Clinic of the Snows, discarded muddled thinking which arose from cloaked neurosis and divided followers of the faith into two sorts: those who used their religion as a means of understanding others, and those who used it as a means of deceiving themselves.

She used to say: "If you can't use your brain without begging permission from God, you might just as well not use it at all. Faith is no substitute for logic." Most of all she fought shy of probationers who protested their womanhood. "The world," she would say, "is not just divided into two sexes. If you think you're Cleopatra, go and prove it elsewhere. In here your task is to be compassionate towards those who have already done so without one-tenth the effort." The repressed lesbians were a menace not because there was ever any question of overt peculiarity but because their emotional dilemma generated sentimentality towards female patients who needed firmness, and masked hatred towards men who merely found sin commendably straightforward. "Our job," she said, "is to help them control it, not to add to their confusion with a piece of our own. Remember we are structurally the same as the people we deal with: ninety-nine per cent water."

The itinerant Mother Superior, who visited the clinic every three months or so, disliked some of Theresa's modern views on life; but had to keep quiet because there was a strong movement in Rome in support of the "enlightened" school. Theresa was difficult to snub; already doing well through correspondence tuition from a University she could back up her views with facts.

But on the day of the Mother Superior's routine visit, which came a week after the Sedgewick incident, Theresa did not

attempt to communicate her inner suspicions – facts or no – concerning the liaison between the psychiatrist (Dr Moyen) and George Verolde and what it meant on a spiritual level. She knew that the older woman couldn't possibly grasp it; as she also knew that she herself could not, with success, go over her head to the cardinal.

So as she bid the stern lady goodbye at the door, and watched the car wind out of sight down the pass towards Stradt, she resolved to find out more. Hard facts were what she needed; and hard facts were going to be difficult to come by. But a written report with a few of these would be difficult for the Mother Superior to block and that was the only course open.

To begin her enquiries, Sister Theresa employed precisely that quality within herself which she neither flaunted nor admitted to: her feminine intuition.

And she could not take her mind off that dam.

"I shall start there," she said to herself, without praying – and joined one of the conducted tours around it.

Up here on the parapet it was, as usual, a brilliantly sunny day; and you could look down if you wanted to (Theresa didn't) from a great height upon the skiing residents of the Randolf, who may have been of lower elevation (in more ways than one) but who were none the less employing the law of gravity to perfectly good use.

The ruddy-faced guide now led the way across the buttress towards the intake tower . . . which didn't look like a tower at all but had the appearance of a great flat box standing on thick legs sunk into the bottom of what had once been a natural lake. He had an easy time of it, because the visitors, of many nationalities, all wore headphones and simply listened to a recorded commentary in whatever language they chose. Each section of the commentary coincided with each location at which the guide paused. The parade of tourists then pulled out their plugs, followed obediently to the next site, and plugged in for more canned information. This was offered in the style of the old-fashioned, "goodness-gracious-me-isn't-that-marvellous" kind of travelogue, liberally weighted down with statistics . . .

"From where you are standing, looking towards the south-east, you are now observing what is probably one of the most spectacu-

lar examples of modern engineering on earth. For here, in what was once a natural lake, is a vast amount of power, stored in the form of one thousand million gallons of water . . ."

Sister Theresa adjusted her headphones and tried to imagine a thousand million gallons of water.

". . . For beneath the beautiful, ice-topped surface are some huge pipes which carry the water down to Stradt. And there the turbines – in effect, water wheels – drive the generators which make the electricity," obliged the tape recorded voice. Then followed the impressive statistics . . . "In cubic metres, the amount of concrete used for the dam wall itself was in excess of . . . The diameter of the draw-off is no less than . . . the this that and the other is incredibly more than this-much and that-much and the other-much and . . ." But though a technician would have been perplexed at there being no mention of a "spillway" Theresa herself wasn't listening. She was, in fact, constitutionally impervious to statistics and preferred to study the be-headphoned group of fifteen or so lethargic wanderers who were taking even less notice of the remorseless squawkings than she was.

She noticed a marked predominance of hats, and concluded from their tilt that few of these bore relevance to the skiers down below.

She noticed a man and woman from England who had the same pushed-out mouths exactly. She was quite sure this arose from drinking huge quantities of tea from identical, thin china cups and she wondered momentarily if this helped them kiss.

And she noticed – suddenly – that Dr Moyen had joined the group from behind. This disturbed her, but she smiled very slightly without really looking at him and greeted him appropriately.

In German, Moyen said: "My dear Sister Theresa! It is quite hopeless to disguise yourself as a tourist."

"Even nuns tour, Doctor."

"But not with your eagle eyes. Are they never off duty? I always get the impression you can take in at least six quite different things at once. For instance the way you look at the hats. You don't see them as *hats*. You see them as labels. I don't think you could pass a garbage bin without lifting off the lid to see inside."

They were ushered into an elevator and as a change from the headphones the ruddy-faced guide mentioned that this shaft passed all the way down through the rock to the powerhouse itself, thousands of feet below. "Well, it's a lot warmer than a chairlift, Sister Theresa," said the doctor. "Might I ask, simply out of curiosity, what brought you up here?"

The elevator started to descend rapidly and somebody giggled as somebody else clasped a hand to a tormented stomach. But Theresa stood quite still. "Curiosity," said Theresa with a cool smile. "And you followed me up."

"Yes. Sister Mary Wilhelmina told me my only chance of seeing you at all this afternoon was to pursue you all over the dam."

"You wish me to talk about a patient? Who?"

Moyen looked around the car. "Later," he said, and fell silent. Moyen had a tight jaw, capable of ending a conversation just by the set of it. When he talked, in his crisp, energetically accurate manner, the jaw machined itself into ratchet action then stopped as suddenly as before. When he wanted to he could be charming; but like the jaw, this charm could be turned abruptly on and off. Now, as he stood still, facing the metal doors, standing as he was slightly crouched and with both hands thrust into pockets, it was in the "off" position.

"It is advisable," said the guide in a bland, singsong voice, "for you all to yawn and swallow, due to the change in pressure."

So everybody yawned and swallowed and discussed the change of pressure in several languages all the way down to the bottom. There they started laughing because most of them couldn't stop yawning even when there was no further change of pressure. Moyen did not laugh. The electric doors drew open, showing the upper floor of the powerhouse. Most of the party followed the guide some twenty yards along to the first of the huge row of generators. Though you could only see the housing covering their tops, the general impression was one of sepulchral vastness. There was surprisingly little sound from the machines. More plugging in of headphones; more facts and figures, no doubt, squirting into bored ears.

Moyen drew Theresa away from the group, standing with his crouched-up back towards them. He stared unseeingly at a row of electronic indicator dials. Theresa could see that the guide was

watching the two of them cautiously. He evidently decided, though, that nuns don't interfere with the works. So he left them alone and wandered up and down like a patient shepherd, tolerant of his herd.

"I was talking with the Mother Superior when she came yesterday," said Moyen. "I told her that although I felt that the atmosphere at the Clinic was good for my patients, I nevertheless thought it improper that you should use too much Christian teaching in my absence. It sometimes confuses psychiatric patients, you know, if they feel they are being indoctrinated. I hope you don't mind my saying this." He watched her, not minding if she minded or not. "As you know, I've said the same kind of thing before – to you."

Theresa never replied to Moyen immediately and this was a deliberate, thought-out policy. It meant that on those occasions when she needed time to think it didn't show so much. For her this policy was an effort; she was naturally a spontaneous person used to speaking her mind. At length she asked mildly: "Are you thinking of a particular patient?"

"Christina Teuson."

Sister Theresa was not hand in glove with the automated powerhouse, but she could scarcely have timed her question to better effect.

An unearthly wail went up; and even Moyen, who did not know about the acoustical effect of water being forced into a system of cavities, seemed shaken for a moment.

So he stared at her, almost as if she'd done it.

And as Theresa held her expression on him she wondered in that second whether some hallucination had momentarily appeared before him, as if deeply ingrained guilt concerning something he was doing to other human minds, without being aware of it himself, had somehow been conjured by the gasp that echoed through the hall.

And Moyen seemed to see in Theresa's face an unspoken accusation.

With a weird, low-pitched screaming noise, often likened to a dying monster of the deep, the newly started generator cut into the system. One or two tourists had ripped off their headphones as they gawked at each other. The guide was grinning at them and

the two pink patches over his cheeks came up a few tones as he explained briefly that the end of the world hadn't yet come.

Theresa waited for the newly operative turbine to settle to the quiet note of the others, and went on: "In the first place I can't quite understand why she's there, Dr Moyen," raising her eyebrows politely.

But Moyen had had time to recover. Adopting the role of an indulgent expert too secure to be angered, he said, "For you that's unusual. You generally understand the illnesses of my patients very well. Because of this I tolerate what is sometimes dangerously like interference from you on basic matters of treatment." He watched her carefully. "I take it that you haven't varied her regime of sedation?"

This time he had angered her. "Are you telling me," she said, "that you think such 'interference' from me extends to changing their medication?"

"You remarked to me the other day that Christina's sedation was surprisingly heavy."

"It is. But the only person I said that to is you. And you're the only person who can do anything about it."

"And you think I should?"

"I think six hundred milligrams of chlorpromazine is a lot of tranquillizer."

As the group started sauntering back towards them for the next point of call, Theresa and Moyen drifted on with them and Moyen remarked: "And how long will it be, Sister Theresa, before you start writing to Rome, saying that I over-prescribe?"

"Rome is hardly a general post office for that purpose, Doctor. You may rely on it."

He raised his eyebrows as she had done. "Good."

In the control room next door the guide decided that nuns should get preferential treatment. Shyly he asked: "Is there anything special you'd like to see?"

"Well, yes. Thank you. You've been telling us this is the control room . . . But who controls it? I don't see anyone."

The guide looked pleased with the question, even if the answer came out very much like the other tape-recordings. "In fact, there is always a man on duty here though he has little to do. The level of the dam at the top and the number of generators

actually in use . . . these and a number of other factors are decided by a computer."

"Are we going to see it?"

A grin. "That would be quite difficult. This unit here at Stradt," he taped, "is part of a centralized scheme and is controlled, along with many other similar schemes, at great distance."

"Why?"

"It is a great saving on equipment and expense. It is cheaper to build one large computing centre than it is to build a number of smaller ones."

"Then if it's a long way away, how does it, er, know what to do?"

"Information is carried to and from the computer centre instantaneously. That generator you heard switched on, for instance . . . Much information has to be exchanged rapidly before the decision to start up is made."

Theresa smiled politely. "Would it be a silly question to ask where this computer centre actually *is*?"

"Not silly." The ruddy cheeks went up a further notch. "But I can't answer it and I doubt if the supervisor can, either. We don't know!"

Moyen stepped forward as if to say something and Theresa caught his guarded look for a moment. Then the look was gone. He just said, smiling: "I can see that your curiosity does not stop within the confines of the clinic."

Theresa smiled, but didn't comment and went on with her questions. "I suppose," she said, "that the water level of the dam has to be very carefully watched. Could it ever break the dam wall?"

The guide cocked his head on one side. "Well, to be honest, you could break any dam wall if the weight of water behind it became greater than the design tolerance of the bulkhead. But it is a very simple matter to maintain the right level. The water cannot exceed a certain depth because sluice gates are opened automatically when the required level is achieved. This diverts superfluous water down the natural cataract where it used to flow before we sunk the pipes into the rock for the purpose of spinning the turbines. You can see the waterfalls further round the mountain. They are very beautiful and make many rainbows.

They feed into the same river as here, but further downstream. In the thaw there is a considerable spill of water round there; but the level in the dam is low so at present it is only a trickle."

She smiled. "I see. Thank you for your private lecture."

"It is a great pleasure."

He rejoined the others. Moyen looked at his watch. "I have some calls to make. But have I made my point concerning Christina? It is very important, you know."

She looked at him hard. "I'm sure it is, Doctor. But since she is to be removed to London in a few days I can't see why you are so concerned."

He asked curtly: "Who told you that?"

"She did." More softly, Theresa added: "Even if you decide to prevent my saying things to her, I am sure you would not wish your patient to keep such a secret from me? I need the bed, Doctor, and I was glad to know."

Moyen said nothing, but grunted a farewell.

Theresa left for the clinic an hour or so later.

Lingering in her mind, though, were the guide's last words to her.

"*. . . at present it is only a trickle.*"

As she walked back, through gathering darkness and a freshening wind, she couldn't somehow get this innocent observation out of her mind.

She was disturbed enough by her talk with Moyen but worse was to come. She was met at the entrance to the clinic only to be told by her deputy, Sister Mary Wilhelmina, that Christina had discharged herself.

"She's *left*? In *that* condition? How did it happen?"

There had long been antagonism between Theresa and Mary Wilhelmina so that the two were simply not in touch except over the mere matter of words. Theresa's junior was, in short, in the Moyen camp; yet – and for this Theresa now roundly cursed herself – it had never come out in the open and Theresa had tried to convince herself that Mary Wilhelmina was all right. You can't fight "atmosphere" within a convent when there is nothing to put your finger on, and it was bad enough to be on such bad terms with the principal psychiatrist. Some semblance of unity had to be maintained.

But looking at the veiled cunning in Mary Wilhelmina's eyes Theresa realized at once that no such unity existed and that it was highly improbable that the truth about Christina's departure would emerge now.

Very calmly, Theresa said: "Come in the office," – leading the way. To get there, you went down to the end of this corridor, where the brass tray stood beneath the wooden Crucifix, and turned right. If you took the other bar of the "T" you would enter the private ward previously occupied by Christina. Theresa glanced through the open door, saw at once that the room was empty.

"Now . . . tell me what happened."

"It is difficult to say, Sister Theresa."

"You mean, you don't know?"

"First I saw the girl coming out of the chapel."

"What was she doing in the chapel? Has she been in there before?"

"No, Sister. Not that I know of."

"What did you do when you saw her leave the chapel?"

With an odd look Mary Wilhelmina placed a key on the table. "I locked the chapel at once. It's still locked."

"And then?"

"Well, obviously . . .! I checked the girl was back in bed and put out her next lot of tablets."

"Did she take them?"

"No. They're still there. But she seemed perfectly all right and I had other patients to attend to, Sister."

"Of course. Then you went back and found her gone?"

"Yes."

"When was that?"

"Less than an hour ago."

"I see. So she went out, on foot, in the snow? We'll have to look for her. She won't have got much further than Stradt. And if we can't find her that way we'll have to call the police."

Mary Wilhelmina's expression was inscrutable as she said: "I hope you don't think I've been negligent."

"No, I don't." Theresa added thoughtfully: "not negligent, Sister." And their eyes met. There was no doubt about it: Wilhelmina looked triumphant.

Theresa said: "All right, Sister Wilhelmina. Dr Moyen is on his rounds at present but try to phone him."

"Where will you be?"

Theresa rose, taking the key. "In the chapel. Have the car ready in five minutes and we'll start searching."

"Shall I come?"

Theresa did not look at her this time. "I'd rather you stayed here. I'll take one or two off Recreation. They can go with me."

Wilhelmina towered to her full height. She was taller than Theresa, and poker-backed. Almost with contempt, she said: "Very well, Sister."

So often, the plain polished door of the chapel signified consolation to Theresa and, particularly now, she felt she needed strength. Never before had she experienced a situation in which sensations of positive evil had infiltrated the home ground of the God in whom she believed. Yet now it was all around her, dirtying the place, winning something away, extracting peacefulness and replacing it with conflict and hate.

Theresa paused by the door, listening to the wind outside, which was rising. Electric cables, directly over the roof and sagging halfway through their span, sang eerily and Theresa was reminded of the moment at which Sedgewick had fallen to his death from the next pylon but one. The thought made her shiver; and when she inserted the key in the lock her hand was trembling.

She would pray for a release from this freezing sense of loneliness. With this thought in mind, she turned the key and opened the chapel door.

The window was wide open and the place was in darkness, for the wind had blown the candles out. It flapped and banged on its frame and swirls of snow-powder whipped in and sprayed over Theresa's habit as she moved swiftly across to bang the window shut.

The wind had slammed the door and with only the dim light from the lamp standard outside to help her Theresa had to fumble around for matches. As she did so, an unexplained instinct prickled her spine. Finally she found a matchbox in her thermometer pocket. She was so nervous that she broke the first match. The rattling of the matchbox seemed very loud in her ears as she

got out a second one and as this flared against the striking pad the sound seemed explosive. She took a fresh candle from the rack and lit it carefully.

Then she carried the candle across the chapel and with her other hand started to cross herself as she turned towards the altar.

She stopped dead, halfway through the downstroke. And for the first time the full terror – blinding and unmitigated by doubt or explanation – penetrated, with intense accuracy, straight to the soul.

For she held the candle up to where the Crucifix should have been.

The sacrilege and the affront of what she saw made her gasp and turn almost as white as the landscape outside.

In place of the Crucifix was a large model of a pylon. The thing stood about eighteen inches high. In this grotesque context it constituted an obscene defacement that reduced the status of the little stained-glass window above to the level of a drawing upon a lavatory wall.

In momentary hallucination arising from the intense shock, Theresa seemed to see, there on the pylon, the mocking death-figure of the least immortal man in her recent experience . . . electrical martyr to some nonsensical cause.

Theresa, neither hysterical nor petulant, did not smash the emblem as someone else might have done. But, recovering some of her composure, she picked it up very carefully, using the skirt of her habit as a glove, and carried it from the chapel without touching it at all.

Carefully, she carried it to the office; and there she placed it on the desk.

Having done that, she sat down and vomited.

Chapter Ten

THE slick driver of the orange and yellow platform trolley stopped it with a violent clatter. The long line of trailers he was towing tried to concertina into one another and a whole stack of parcels flopped on to the station platform. The driver cursed at the girl he had so narrowly missed, then saw she had a hand to her forehead. He stepped off the trolley and approached her.

Paddington was an echo chamber. Nearby, the deep throb of a big diesel came up through your feet as the 10.05 Pullman inched in from its run from Bristol. Taxis honked like impatient sea-lions at feeding time but they fed on hastening people with bulging suitcases and an appointment in town. Post office wagons, great red clumsy things which ate parcels, revved clonking engines and flashed headlights at immobile bunches of harassed travellers waiting. And all the time the loud speakers were saying "*Will Miss Christina Teuson, Christina TEUSON, passenger for Penzance, please go to the Station Manager's office . . .?*" – and all the time Christina wasn't hearing it.

"You all right, Miss?"

"Yes . . . Sorry."

"You want to watch out."

"Yes, I know, I'm sorry. I'll help you pick up these parcels."

"Skip it. You're not well. Hadn't you better . . .?"

But the girl had drifted off. The driver stared after her. He thought, '*a rare bit of tail like that left all alone? It shouldn't be legal.*'

Christina followed the sign on the incongruously pompous barrier. The sign said *Cornish Riviera Express* and the barrier had coats of arms all the way along.

She thought, I think I'll find a seat up near the restaurant car. I just hope it isn't Railway Fish, today. That's the thing, about Railway Fish. It hasn't got a name and you never find it any-

where else. You can smell it three cars away. Is it turbot? Or haddock? Or perhaps hurbot or even taddock . . .

"*Will Miss Christina Teuson, Christina TEUSON, passenger for Penzance, please go to the Station Manager's office?*"

I wish he wouldn't go on saying that. As I walk, I keep coming to a loud speaker, hanging down all that way from the roof.

Each loud speaker points at me and rasps my name, but I'm sure it's nothing to do with me really. After all, who could know I'm here, anyway? I didn't tell anyone I was coming. I didn't tell anyone I was leaving Switzerland, even.

I think this carriage might do . . . Or shall I go and get a dining car ticket first? . . .

"First or second lunch, Miss?"

"Er, second lunch, please."

"Just the one?"

"Yes."

"You'll find plenty of seats further up, Miss."

"Thanks. Is it fish today?"

"No. Only on Fridays."

Here's a seat.

"*Will Miss Christina Teuson, Christina TEUSON, passenger for Penzance, please go to the Station Manager's office?*"

For a long time she didn't even notice the station announcement. It blended into the rest of the station scene – impersonal, not meant for her.

"*Will Miss Christina Teuson, Christina TEUSON, passenger for Penzance, please go to the Station Manager's office?*"

But subconsciously the announcement registered. She was not to know that the chattering switch in her mind was exactly matched by the chattering *flipflop* in a computer, a long way off, which had assessed the effect on her of switching symbols on a chapel altar.

She was not to know that two men, deeply entombed in a control room, were estimating progress. These two (one was John Forbes and the other a nondescript called Fellowes of whom more later) would in fact have conveyed to people like the trolley driver a strong sense of sanity and motive. They had definite aims and these aims led to definite actions. Or at least, so it would have appeared. And when John Forbes turned to the nondescript Stewart Fellowes and said: "We have a seventy per cent probability

indication: it's Paddington Station," – and when Fellowes straightened the handkerchief in his jacket breast-pocket and then folded his arms and then smiled knowingly and then said: "The announcement has been put out," they both thought that they were conducting a useful scientific experiment to do with Behaviour, capital B included. Forbes' then remark: "Her flipflop condition will have to be incorporated into her C.A.V." would, of course, have been incomprehensible to anyone outside of the small group of specialists who understood such things; but the comment drew a wise nod from the nondescript Fellowes, who at last managed to get the top of his white handkerchief exactly parallel with the slit of the pocket.

"That should be interesting," was his reply.

Actually, Christina couldn't remember what had been on the altar at all. Instead she remembered a blackness, a kind of pulsating blackness, which seemed to obliterate her vision.

Many things swam before the blackness. Images which merged into one another in an incomprehensible mosaic, so vivid sometimes that she was certain they actually existed here in the railway compartment, confused her and frightened her and made it hard to hear through the hissing of steam outside, where an ancient shunting engine stood like a museum piece among newer things.

She saw Peter and yet she did not. She wanted to be with him and yet she did not. Dr Moyen's reassuring face was there; yet suddenly it turned black like the altar, was replaced by Theresa whose face changed to a skull.

In the back of her mind there came a humming sound, like electricity . . . and through this humming sound a repetitive voice gradually swelled through. It said: "Listen to these words, Christina, listen to these words. You will program C.A.V. stroke forty-nine and this will be you and this will be you and this —" . . . then the voice faded because the hum obliterated it.

And quite suddenly she realized the station announcement was for her, and quite suddenly her mind seemed to clear . . .

Seemed . . .

Briskly, she quit the train and she walked, quite purposefully, back along the platform, and went without a further thought to the Station Manager's office.

No visitor awaited her there; but a youthful assistant gaped at

her and thought, '*you seem to live in a different world but boy, where's that Slow Boat to China?*' . . . then handed her the telephone receiver which had been lying on the counter-top, off its rest, waiting for her.

"I hope they're still there," he said with studied casualness; then handed the receiver to her with perfunctory unconcern. He had always been taught that the prettier they are, the ruder you have to be.

Pretty? – no, this one wasn't so much *pretty*. She didn't half make your pulse bang away, though . . .

He remained unnoticed, however; and the telephone, on the other hand, consumed her entire attention. "*Like a rivet*," wrote the assistant in his mental paperback. "Now I know what that phrase really means. Some boy friend she must have. I bet he's filthy rich."

There was no boy friend, rich or poor, at the end of that line; and notwithstanding the clearcut ideas nurtured by the authorities of the general post office on what constitutes the straightforward definition of a two-way telephone conversation, they would nevertheless have been deeply disturbed had they known the extent of the technological improvements which had been incorporated into their own communications system.

There are, of course, ways of linking a telephone circuit with illicit equipment which don't show on the ordinary detection gear used by Civil Service sleuths when such things as "bugging" are suspected; but the more sophisticated methods are quite impossible to trace and they aren't really all that difficult. Moreover, if some engineer gets more than usually curious about the somewhat subtler quirks that can show up on the most elaborate tracing equipment at his disposal, he can hardly pursue his investigations on being informed, by a higher authority, that the "improvements" have been made by a legitimate government authority which is not, however, named. You have to be pretty naïve to suppose that there is any sharp delineation between strictly legal phone-tapping carried out by Home Office order and the various levels of semi-official interference delegated to Unknowns who can always be disowned by an outraged Minister in the House of Commons . . .

'*Such things, as my Right Honourable friend perfectly well knows, do not happen in England . . .*'

The communication systems developed and used by that organism which came to be called *Servex* are still largely unknown, for the simple but disturbing reason that nobody yet knows where Servex ends and normal society begins. The two are dovetailed; and one tends to disown the other. Thuswise is the snow-white integrity of a modern democracy utilized by the basically undemocratic to gain their own ends. —

– Or at least to gain ends to which they are obsessively and inextricably committed.

But when this particular call was connected it is of historical interest that the following events occurred:

The agitated pointer of a dial, buried beneath the sealed top of an old mine vent in Cornwall, jiggered up and down, unseen, and showed that a current was flowing through a hidden and unlabelled telephone cable. (For the technical, this was quite a cable: having a bandwidth of 4·7 megacycles and 100% screening when correctly matched.) The cable was manufactured to GPO specifications at a huge factory in the Far East by people who neither asked where the design specifications originated nor to what purpose they would be put. Yet by the time an Import Licence became an essential, their function – authorized through a number of departments having an international flavour ("vaguely NATO" – as one official had remarked drily as he directed that the order should be ratified) – their function had received the same sort of amorphous blessing as rained on the shoulders of George Verolde when he sought – and got – certain facilities not directly to do with his contract for supplying so-called "teaching machines" to the Ministry of Education.

But it didn't stop there. The cable ran under the sea and thereafter the ocean. It passed quite close to the wreck of the *Titanic* but not so close as to rub against the torn and pitted remnant of the almost totally corroded hull. It ran deep along the seabed off Nantucket and then lay softly and unobtrusively on the Shelf a few miles to the east of Long Island.

And from there it connected with the Bell Telephone System (without, needless to say, the knowledge of that perfectly legitimate body) so that it could be switched through to anyone who happened to possess the dialling code.

If someone happened to dial this number in error, all they

would have heard would be an indecipherable garble provided by one of the more advanced – but not unusually advanced – systems of voice scrambling presently in use. True, the Bell company could no doubt break the code; but the Bell company can't check every single call that takes place on a system handling some hundred million telephone conversations per day.

The quality of sound, once de-scrambled, was of an astonishingly high order, as is made possible by accepted standards of telecommunications available to anyone with the money. Spaced at intervals of 7.2 miles throughout the length of the cable were nodules, very slight bulges in the cable, containing amplifiers which ensured that any loss of quality was made up at each.

It follows that an organism possessing neither a leader nor a central brain nor a definite aim (beyond the one it thinks it has) can't have a headquarters. It has dumps, large and small, like the nerve-centres throughout the human body which all connect eventually. In the human brain they are grouped and then carried along trunk nerve-routes until being dealt with in the brain itself.

In Servex this was not precisely so; and the position was more like the emotional havoc caused by a schizophrenia. So that there were several interlinked "brains" throughout the world, each having a totally inestimable power of reasoning and decision because you could never separate what one was "thinking" from what another was "thinking". Like an untethered machine with too many hinges, the organism took the average and made up its own mind what it would do.

On this basis, then, a very large – but not abnormally intelligent – computer, installed in a New York skyscraper, being the office building of TRAX (United States) Incorporated, reacted to certain word-coding contained (did she but know it) in what Christina had to say in reply to other word-codings intrinsic in the dialogue coming from "the other end" . . . though this "other end" was not simply one place of origin and the voice she heard was neither that of John Forbes nor Stewart Fellowes nor George Verolde nor of any one identifiable human being.

On this basis, too, a needle moved in a communications centre in Europe which people quite honestly thought was to do with the relaying of television broadcasts, acting upon a control system that people quite honestly thought was a network for assessing airline

bookings and schedules, through another network which people quite honestly thought organized the number of generators that should be running in the powerhouse at Stradt, until certain signals were conveyed to the annexe at the Clinic of the Snows, which people quite honestly thought was exclusively devoted to neurological research . . . until a punch card was issued by a machine in Dr Moyen's office – also in the annexe – which he quite honestly thought was entirely concerned with an aspect of Christina Teuson's illness specifically provided by the clinic's own equipment.

Machines are not meant to spontaneously shake hands with each other; and the clue to what was actually going on had not yet emerged either at the Freid Institute nor at those other isolated depôts engaged in similar research into psychological aberrations of the moment.

And Servex, which in a sense did not and could not know either, was nevertheless compulsively dedicated to the task of making sure that no one else did.

Which is why the phonecall received by Christina at Paddington Station, on that day, was so crucial a one.

Its result was that she thought it was quite independently her own idea to go somewhere other than Penzance . . . all by herself, without being threatened, pursued, or intimidated by anybody.

"I have decided," she said brightly to the man in the ticket office, "not to travel to Penzance after all."

The man, who was tired, and who hadn't taken a proper holiday – to Penzance or anywhere else – all year, shook his head wearily and said *Tt Tt Tt* and told her in a slow, patient, carefully-controlled monologue, exactly what she had to do to get her money back.

"Where do you want to go instead?"

She told him.

"Yes . . . That'd be from Liverpool Street," he said, and ripped a fresh ticket out of the rack.

As he stamped it in the pusher, he asked, hollow-eyed: "Why can't you people *ever* make up your minds?"

Chapter Eleven

FAT Mrs Jemison secretly disliked Dr Williams, whom she thought vastly inferior to Richard Stranger.

Of course, you had to concede that Dr Williams was *tidy*, he didn't smoke or anything; and moreover he lived with his wife, which was a thoroughly tidy thing to do.

But she didn't like the way Dr Williams worked himself up into a sort of froth about his own jokes – especially when they were at the expense of none other than Fat Mrs Jemison.

For example, the way he came in this morning. She had hardly been out of the living room *one minute* when this *hammering* started up. Now, Mrs Jemison felt that hammering was her own privileged speciality. Her protest broom was well-known throughout the Freid and had ended many a conference. But what was Dr Williams doing, hammering in someone else's cottage?

"What are you doing, hammering in someone else's cottage?"

(Already, the first signs of the Froth were showing. Dr Williams was going pink in the face and breathing rather fast.) "It's a block of wood," he said, "which, as you see, has altered the effective height of the beams," – he meant the ceiling.

"What for?"

"Mr Stranger." (Dr Williams, stupid man, bonked one more nail into a bit of wood.) "You see? The beam is now four inches thicker." (He was really panting now, and started hopping up and down, so that the idiot man bonked his own head, by mistake.)

"Serves you right, Dr Williams," said Fat Mrs Jemison. She used the word "Doctor" as a derogatory term. "No tea for you."

"But I didn't want any tea."

"Do you mean to say you came in here just to do that?"

"I'll go now." He added: "Don't tell him about it."

The woman stared after him in exasperated disapproval.

Apart from isolated acts of inexplicable facetiousness, Dr

Norman Williams was no droll character casting himself in any particular mould. This was clear when he called Peter into his office to brief him.

The "office" was a hut of unstained wood. On the inside, brand-new timber that smelled delicious; virgin wood direct from the bandsaw.

The place stood back some way from the cottages, sheltering itself near the very pines out of which it was constructed. There was a simple, plain-wood table and no sign of a telephone. Only the heating was intrusively modern; and a powerful fan-heater purred contentedly on its wall-mounting.

"My 'doctor' prefix covers two qualifications. Both medical and Ph.D. My father was a bishop and I believe in God. I don't want you to go holy on us and I'm sure you won't. Smoke if you like – I hate them. That tin lid on the desk was a present from Richard Stranger who worships the tobacco plant like Ham worships sex . . . What's bothering you, Mr Shackleton?"

"What's the good of all this, Dr Williams? This place is all very charming and rustic; but isn't it just running away?"

"Aren't you just a little impatient?"

"I'm more than that. I'm ashamed."

"We can't all be heroes all of the time."

"There's no danger of that! Look what I'm doing now . . . just lying around feeling bitter and twisted about a woman. What use is that?"

"That's not really what you think at all, though. Is it? You're thinking how it would look to others. That's superficial. Your objections are natural but you must understand what you're doing before you do it. Later, when you talk to Ham Nichols, I think you'll see why."

"Another conference behind the scenes? Another detached interview on Communications Theory? Dr Williams, if you and Stranger and Ham believe there is something wrong with technocracy then surely you should come out in the open? Read a paper at Exeter University . . . Get some correspondence going in the national dailies . . . Appear on television and explain . . . anything but this remote beehive! I'm sorry . . . but that's how I feel."

"Shackleton, you tell me just how far you've got with the direct

approach in winning back your girl and I'll listen . . . I'm sorry, that was a little unfair. But I'm a doctor, and your 'technocracy' is the patient. The symptoms are there, but it's one of those cases where you have to wait for the crisis. Waiting is the hardest thing in the world to do. Whatever Richard has told you to the contrary, he doesn't enjoy being called a crank any more than I do —"

" – and the same goes for me!"

Williams looked displeased, tried to understand this tormented young man's impatience. He got up with a sudden, bouncy movement and stared out towards the reservoir. Receding pylons neatly provided perspective, towering high towards a boring-looking sky. Williams thought it would rain because a boring sky always meant that. But right now he had to think of a way to make this man Shackleton feel a lot less bored . . . "Tell me, have you the faintest idea what Servex really is?"

"A state of mind . . ."

"Yes? Go on."

"I don't know . . . perhaps it's where people have gone to a computer and got hold of a fistful of digits without realizing quite what they mean. They're too hot to hold and they get rid of them again, pouring them into another computer . . . passing the buck."

Williams looked interested. "Why? Why pass the buck?"

Peter shrugged. "Don't they always? – when it's easier?"

Williams emitted one of his rare, jagged laughs. "You have a gift for simplicity, Shackleton. That's not bad – but I still think you could usefully go into this thing in more detail . . . I think even you would admit it would take more than that to explain the Trek – or account for Sedgewick's death – or even the erratic attitude of your girl friend."

"Supposing she was like that anyway?"

"Come on, Shackleton! You don't believe half the things you're saying. What are you trying to do? – make a case out for common-sense explanations? If so, don't you think we tried that? It's tempting but it doesn't work." He opened a drawer and residual sawdust shot up in the air. It conveyed the fresh tang of the sawmill. Williams didn't immediately hand across the press-cutting he took from the drawer, but leaning on wiry arms he snapped: "Reactions! You've got to know enough about Servex to gauge

them. You can't do that in ignorance. Consider: a few weeks ago we have an air crash – one of those odd ones nobody understands."

"The one that killed John Forbes' father?"

"Yes." Now he offered the cutting. "And it looks odder every moment. Tell me what you think." Another brief glare and an impatient trip to the window while he waited.

Peter read the thing through.

AIR CRASH ENQUIRY

Accident Assessor Declares Himself 'Deeply Disturbed'

Adrian Hanyard, Q.C., accident assessor for the Ministry Enquiry into the crash of a jet which occurred two weeks ago near Gibraltar, included the following statement in his report, a copy of which has been forwarded to the Director of Public Prosecutions: 'There is no doubt that curious circumstances surround the booking of passengers on to this Air Europeda flight. For without exception, all fifty-eight of the passengers were people whom one might term "incompatibles" with widely varying aspects of "automation". Of them, 17 were from various sections of education – most of them being University lecturers holding unpopular views at technological Universities; 8 were "misfits" from computer firms; 2 were journalists who specialize in criticizing what Marshall McLuhan has called "the electric age" and the remainder were electronics specialists of all kinds who had made themselves conspicuous in criticism of the application of electronics in private human affairs.

'It is impossible to suppose that these fifty-eight individuals were all aboard the same aircraft by coincidence; and yet no conscious link is known to have existed between them (except four who happened to know each other) and all bookings were made independently without any traceable unified purpose whatsoever. Apart from the black box (the flight recorder) which is carried by all passenger aircraft for the purpose of helping to discover the cause of an accident, another (very badly damaged) instrument was found on the flight deck which is thought to have some bearing on the radio message which the captain transmitted a few seconds before the disaster. Although the alien piece of equipment was too badly damaged for the experts to deduce its purpose, the inference of the radio message is alarming:

'The last words of Captain Stephen Maitland were these:—

Christ! But I don't have the right! Alex!
Hard left rudder and —
'– and silence.'

This time, Peter had no comeback. Quietly he said: "So in the last split second, the captain came out of . . . well, some sort of Servex trance?"

"Yes . . . presumably the extreme tension broke down even that mental block."

"What an appalling moment."

"Yes . . ." Dr Williams took the cutting back. "As you say."

Peter, though shaken, stuck to the point: "But why does this mean that anything will come to a head? The accident happened quite some time ago."

"Mr Shackleton, if the inferences contained in this cutting are true, do you think 'passing the buck' explains everything?"

"What I think is, if that accident was rigged, whoever was responsible will get the wind up if he reads this report."

"'Whoever'? – or *whatever*? There's a difference."

Peter grinned. "I'm still sceptical."

"Who wouldn't be! But in either event, wouldn't there be a reaction to the press report?" He saw that Peter took the point. "Before you're any use to man or beast, Shackleton, you've got to be able to guess ahead. The patient is sick. To treat him successfully, we must interpret what goes on in his mind."

"A . . . *composite* patient?"

Williams nodded. "Precisely."

"I have some questions."

"Good."

"Number one: if there was some common link between all the passengers on the aircraft, who booked them on to the flight?"

"Oh . . . didn't you know? The ticketing system of Air Europeda is fully automated."

"But the booking clerks —"

"– *What* booking clerks?"

"They don't use people *at all*?"

Williams replaced the cutting in the drawer. "You'd better not switch airlines, Mr Shackleton. Or you might find yourself on an extremely one-way trip. What's your next question?"

Millionaire Ham Nichols wiped his balding brow and took off his spectacles to clean the lenses on his white overalls. They kept misting up so he couldn't see through the visor of the apparatus before him. You needed to be really on the ball to position those mechanical arms just exactly right.

As he fiddled with his glasses he was gazing lugubriously out of the lab window when movement, across in the hotel, caught his attention. He replaced his spectacles and watched Sue, the trim little nurse, attending to the hotel "guests". But Ham wasn't thinking only of her capabilities as a nurse. He was thinking of a love affair, and what had gone wrong with it.

He was also wondering what the devil had happened to her attitude towards the patients. And most of all he was concerned by the fact that her increasing reluctance to be a woman seemed directly coupled with an increasing callousness towards her charges.

Now, he watched her – saw her pause suddenly just by the hotel door. True, she still *looked* terrific, both above and below the gather at the belt of the crisp uniform. But it seemed a long time ago that he had told her: "The first thing I ever noticed as a kid was that gorgeous rustling sound as a young nurse crossed a ward from point A to point B, and the sensation wasn't just my appendix giving trouble."

"That," the girl had replied, removing the belt, "is a fetish."

"I can live with it. After all, it's not only that you're the best-laundered female of my acquaintance! And you must be crazy anyway," he added, as the rest of the uniform was hung over the back of a chair, "falling for a balding character with eyeglasses, a childish temper, and several million dollars in the Chase National."

The nurse wasn't thinking of Ham now but wondered why the childish lyric was buzzing around her head . . .

'If you go down to the woods today
You're sure of a big surprise;
If you go down to the woods today
You'd better go in disguise . . .'

She stepped outside, felt the loathing for her patients welling up. The first tiny droplets of rain were detected by the antennae

of her eyelashes and that was when she saw Ham through the window of the lab. The brief exchange of looks hardly savoured of romance. She saw Ham frown angrily and turn away. She felt her vagina physically lock itself against him finally – the safe-combination altered and denied him.

'Te-tum te tiddly tum-te tum,
Te tiddly tum-te tum. . . .'

It did not strike her immediately that her growing cynicism towards the patients was abnormal; she simply realized that she hated the sight of these repulsive creatures and wanted them dead. She wanted to do them violence, so that their grotesque lolling faces might register pain, instead of vacuous lunacy.

She found her teeth spontaneously grinding and knew her own expression was contorted with hatred and contempt . . . so that she had to go through a few seconds of imposed acting there in the doorway before she could bear to approach those wretched monsters at all.

And as she crossed the hall, kicking viciously at a tin can which rattled against the booking desk and then bounced and rolled all the way to the tee-vee before it finally stopped, she found – even while she smiled with assumed gentleness – she found herself saying under her breath: "Hallo, *darlings*! And tell me: how are the cracked rejects today?"

With a gargantuan effort she pulled herself together and barely managed to assume a kind of impersonation of herself. Thus equipped, she approached the patient who habitually enjoyed the front row of the television show provided by the sickly set on the site. It was still out of adjustment and Sue's meticulously tidy mind rebelled at having to leave it thus. But Norman Williams wanted it that way and that was the way she had to leave it.

This patient – the one, in fact, whom Peter had first inspected upon his arrival – seemed to her unusually restless. She noticed the groanings and mutterings had been on the increase in the last few days. Not that he said anything lucid, nor looked any more ordered in the mind. Rather the reverse; he looked – she thought – almost dangerous, as if he might suddenly thrash out for no apparent reason.

She kept her distance and reminded herself that Mr Friend (as he was listed) was physically strong, whatever his mental state . . .

'If you go down to the woods today,
You'd better go in disguise . . .'

Stranger bonked his head and much to Fat Mrs Jemison's disappointment (despite her views on Williams' Games) didn't react in any way at all. He just said: "Tonight: the Suit."

"What for?"

"Dinner at the University. Doesn't it warrant the Suit?"

"Mr Stranger, you promised me never to wear that terrible thing again."

He waved his arms high in the air, waggling his wrists like a pianist doing muscle exercises. "Hah! I was crossing my fingers."

He joined Peter and Williams in the wooden office, found them at the window, looking at something. He didn't interrupt, but squinted up at the weather. It had been a winter for storms, and they kept coming as if they'd got used to it. The trouble was that for some reason the hotel "guests" were badly disturbed by the sight of lightning, and a thunderstorm always meant anxiety up on the hill.

The great pylon, as if featured in the frame of the window, towered before swift clouds, optically appeared to be travelling against them.

Williams was saying he didn't know what Sedgewick disliked so much about a pylon and Peter was saying they must mean something. And Williams, after looking at Stranger and wondering vaguely whether or not he had bonked, said thoughtfully: "My father – a previous Bishop of Exeter – is now a silly old man. That is to say, he hates the sight of those things, out there. And he's been fighting a campaign in the press to stop the CEGB putting them up all over this valley."

"Silly or not," said Peter, "he didn't win. Was his objection purely aesthetic?"

"No. He has some wild theory that the electric cables somehow drain away spiritual thought!"

Stranger, who didn't like glib statements – even from Williams – said: "And how do we know they don't?"

At which point Ham Nichols, who was due to show Peter around the lab, came in to collect him. He was in a vile temper and on the way up the footpath Peter gleaned that this was hardly the moment for a conducted tour. The farce was emphasized as soon as it became apparent, once inside the lab, where the aborted plumbing of the waterworks gave place to transistors, that the electronic equipment was almost as ancient. Conveying the impression that his spectacles saw everything slightly before he did, the most apologetic millionaire ever to compute his alimony on an IBM fumbled around an ill-equipped laboratory like a gardener who suddenly realized there was a singular lack of flowers.

Floundering, he described the function of a variant on the "glovebox" – one of those contraptions in which you manipulate radio-active materials within a container by grappling with trigger mechanisms on the outside. You watch the metal fingers reproducing your own hand movements from a position behind a thick transparent wall. For some reason a wristwatch was clasped in the steel claws inside and Ham forgot to explain what it was doing there. It looked as if it had been borrowed from Salvador Dali and the conversation took a like strain. For Ham rambled on: "I had the weirdest dream about this glovebox contraption, last night." He manipulated one of the triggers. A metal finger at the far end responded. "I walked in here, you see, and found that its paws were fixed on back-to-front . . . the hands kind of outward. And it wanted to shake hands with me." He turned, grimacing. "So I did – and the damn thing pulled me in after it!" He watched gloomily out of the window as a distant flash of lightning caught the surface of the reservoir. "Stupid, isn't it?" he said – and the wristwatch dropped off.

"I," said Peter, "diagnose girl-trouble."

Ham remained lugubrious. "You met the nurse?"

"Very pretty. Nice tight belt and a snazzy uniform. What's wrong with her?"

"Maybe it's me. But then I don't upset the patients."

"You told Williams?"

"No, but I'll have to." He gazed across towards the hotel. "Even I know she terrifies them."

"How long has this been going on?"

"Just gradually. I thought I was mistaken at first."

"May I get personal?"

Ham gave an ironic laugh. "You guessed."

"When?"

"It adds up okay."

"Then you'd better tell Williams. This is the wrong setting for a Servex dish."

"You can sure starve," said Ham gloomily, "contemplating the food."

In passing-fair imitation of Musiconics, the first hollow rumbling of thunder, squeezed through the neck of the valley at the estuary end and bowling along it almost languidly, rattled the windows of the hotel section and made the nurse pause for a second in her work. Strangely, the storm had held off for a long time, waiting – as it were – for its turn in the weather sequence at the far end of the river. For first the wind had to drop, so that the clouds could stack themselves up, one behind the other, finally to disgorge their content of liquid to best advantage. Thus throughout the day the glass slowly dropped; and as the needle gradually unwound, so the long winter evening began to draw in.

First, the bright colours had been drained away from the tight little group of thatched cottages and beyond them, on the horizon which backdropped the far end of the reservoir, the darkened sky merged indiscriminately into heather and then, a few minutes later, no silvery water sheened. Lights came on early; a few distant cottages provided lonely marker beacons on Dartmoor, till a haze of drizzling rain washed them out.

With the dropping of the pressure the full cold of winter crawled in; and cheerful chimney smoke, refusing to rise more than a few feet over the thatch of Stranger's cottage, hung low near the hill, discolouring the new red paint of the solitary telephone box, whose time-clock light switched itself on with a non-committal *snap*!

The instant when the light came on might have been a reference point on a time-log, for it marked the moment of transition. Nothing was ever quite the same again thereafter.

Peter, who stood at the window of the lab, looked down the hill as Stranger emerged from the cottage in a scraggy suit. Passing close by the telephone box, he stooped his way into the old Chevvy

and started the engine just as the first of the rain splattered on the bonnet. The car disappeared towards Exeter.

Williams also noted the light. He checked his watch against it and headed at a fast walking pace towards the wooden hut he chose to call an office. He walked with his head slightly down as he so often did, in the determined manner of someone who believed this somehow kept the rain off. It didn't, and his clothes dripped on to the floor. He sat, then, at the desk and tapped a pencil agitatedly, staring straight ahead.

Then he glanced down at the incredibly untidy sheets of paper lying there. Complex mathematical symbols, richly scattered with ink-blots, filled twelve sheets. On the thirteenth was a brief summary written by its author – Richard Stranger. He had written: "These equations represent the basic servo-dynamics and show the feedback between the Servex people and us. According to my reckoning the findings at the air crash enquiry were more than they bargained for. If I am right the truly paranoid element in Servex must now inevitably show. In other words, they will strike back. If there is any truth in your suspicion that the nurse is a Subject then the interaction between her and the patients will already be in evidence. Nichols has not so far confided in us but we can only guess that his vested interest in the nurse is the reason. I shall be back from Exeter late tonight but meanwhile I suggest you keep a careful watch."

So Norman Williams stood up and prepared to go up the hill.

Sue was hesitating at the hotel entrance, was on the verge of telling Ham that there was something tormenting her. For some reason she couldn't quite do it. So she pulled her trim uniform tight-creased over nightnurse-type breasts and took the glass corridor across to the lab, with the idea of telling him only that the patients seemed to have become unusually disturbed. She put it down to the impending storm. It didn't occur to her that it was something in her attitude.

She found Peter and Ham together, arrived in time to hear Peter ask: "But why are those helpless people in the hotel not given psychiatric treatment?"

Ham looked at the nurse thoughtfully, then jiggered with the trigger of the glovebox, trying idly to pick up the watch with the

metal claw at the far end. He said, in an abstracted voice: "Because they have been programmed by Servex so as not to respond to treatment . . ." – but gazing, as Sue in her conflict intended, at the starch armour.

He might have said more, but the first big flash of lightning came then. A great brilliant one and bright blue. Immediately there was a thunderclap like an explosion, right overhead; and as if far too much time had been wasted already and therefore everything had to happen at once, heavy rain was unleashed on the village in an ice-cold flood. Outside, it tattooed on the corrugated tin roof of the transformer room, machining down on to the metal with factory sounds. Through the window you could see water sluicing off the tall porcelain insulators and bulbing in droplets along the thick copper of the "bus bars" which connected them up.

Ham looked up at the girl as a brilliant spark over-exposed her face. He couldn't gauge her actual expression but didn't like what he saw. From her he glanced through the window, suddenly realized that the tee-vee in the hotel lounge, visible across the intervening grass patch, had been adjusted.

He asked sharply: "Did you do that, Sue?"

"No."

"Better go see what's happening."

She said, *Yes . . .!* It was a long drawn-out sound, like a final realization over some long-term riddle. She took the glass corridor, while Peter and Ham stared at each other.

Peter said: "Funny. Even if there *was* some reaction from Servex and she was one of them . . . How would she know? Did she use the phone?"

"Not while I was here."

"Her attitude . . . She's quite different."

"I know." Ham nodded across the way. "So do the Trekkers. Look!"

Standing in the window was Mr Friend. It was startling to see him so orientated. Peter had only seen him lying sprawled, helpless in an easy chair.

Then Sue came running back. You could see clearly in her eyes the conflict. The nurse in her was terrified; the Servex mind triumphant. "Ham! He's locked the inside door!"

"I'll go get Williams."

Peter said: "No. You stay here. I'll find him."

He ran out into the downpour and was swallowed immediately.

Ham cursed and said: "Why won't that damned man Williams instal a telephone in his damn native hut . . .? We'd better go in the front way."

Sue said immediately: "No. You'll disturb them. They're used to me. You stay here."

"What if — ?"

She said firmly: "They won't get violent. They can't."

"Yell quickly if you want help. I'll be watching through the window."

She dashed out into the rain and said, "Okay."

Despite the storm, though, she hesitated in the forecourt, watching through glass distorted by the downpour. Several of them were wandering about, sort of circling. Sue's lips parted in a gasp. Two, who had practically been rooted to their chairs for a month, had somehow wrenched stiffened joints to a standing position and stumbled dangerously and aimlessly around.

Sue, soaked through already, broke the spell which froze her and dashed to the hotel door. She got it open quickly and found herself looking into the demented eyes of Friend. It was as if he was not seeing her, but someone else in her place.

She saw his lips were moving.

"Mr Friend . . .?" He didn't respond, just stared. "Mr *Friend*?"

His lips were moving now, and at last his voice croaked through.

The *ratatat* from the tin roof near by made it impossible to hear.

Sue slammed the door shut behind her, then put her ear to the man's lips.

What he was saying seemed to her curiously lucid. And yet – and sense or nonsense this was the impression she got – the voice seemed to come from a long way off.

The words came slowly, each one a private effort in itself . . . "Why am I in this abyss?"

Long silence. Only rain.

Then: "Why do I shudder and weaken, every time I try to think about it?"

A pause and heavy breathing, asthmatic, unhealthy.

A further crash of thunder – very close – outside. The lights flickered . . . then stayed on.

"What will I have to do?" The eyes stared hard, not at her . . . Speaking this way seemed to be exhausting him, for he swayed. Then he went on, almost in a whisper: "Why do I want to throw myself at the mercy of some indefinable, tormenting thing?"

He seemed to have finished, and just the croaks came.

But then he said: "Is it me?

"Or is it *them*?"

Sue said: "Mr Friend? Are you all right?"

No answer, only the stare

A thumping flash overhead – thunder and lightning precisely together, like gunshot.

A heavy clang from the tin-roofed shed next door as a blue flash encompassed the whole top of the nearby pylon, then zipped across the insulators of the shed itself.

Within, a spring-loaded lever tripped out of its normal position with an explosion that scarred the paintwork. The arm clanged down sharply and the spring zithered with a loud, ugly music note, breaking the circuit.

Pitch darkness as the lights failed.

Ham heard the "lightning-trip" throwing and loped out into the sheering rain, grabbing a flashlight from the racks as he went. With this he banged on the hotel window and yelled: "Come on out!"

Her voice somewhere inside. "What's happened?"

"The main circuit breaker. Come on out!"

Figures in the darkness formed an ugly tableau. Friend seemed to be trying to locate the nurse. Ham almost threw her out of there and slammed the door shut.

Then he made his way through the hotel foyer to the hospital section behind, where the iron-lung case was. And started to hand-crank the respirator.

Peter, stumbling about in the mud at the edge of the reservoir, lost his bearings and could not find the engine shed. There were no lights anywhere and at first he thought all he could do was to wait for another flash of lightning.

Obstinately, the flash refused to transpire; but Peter found he

wasn't so far off the trail when his foot caught in what seemed to be the electric cable leading to the shed.

So he followed it, passing it up through his hands and pulling it up from deep in the mud as he did so.

He couldn't help thinking of the man who was still in the iron lung.

But where the hell was Williams?

The cable seemed to be leading somewhere, for the mud changed to gravel under his feet and he realized he was on a path.

But then there *was* the sound of the engine starting and moreover the sound didn't come from the expected direction.

Peter continued to follow the wire.

Suddenly, ahead, the lights came on. They were the lights of Williams' wooden hut. Someone had got the generator running.

From the light coming through the office window, Peter could see at once that the wire he was following couldn't be that supplying the hut; for, neatly bunched overhead, the proper cable ran on poles up to the transformer room on the hill.

Still following the wire in his hand, Peter found it led round the back of the hut, passing through a hole near the ground and then into the woodwork.

He was beginning to form an unpleasant idea; and ran round to the front of the office to see if it was true.

The office door was unlocked. Peter forgot he was soaked to the skin and was careless of the trail of water that followed him across the coconut matting as he crossed to the section of wall equivalent to the spot on the outside through which the cable had disappeared.

The rain drummed harshly overhead and this was exactly what Peter needed to cover his movements now if what he suspected should turn out to be true.

And it was.

Skilfully concealed between two planks, and much thinner than the cable outside, a piece of screened flex ran along towards the table, then beyond it to the fan-heater.

Mounted just behind the heater was a small microphone.

The impassive engineer with the cigarette dangling from his mouth listened to the pattering noise coming from the loud speaker in the rack overhead.

Then he threw a switchkey before him, and with a dull, flat voice he said: "They seem to be having a storm."

A metallic response came through a second set overhead. "Anything from the hotel?"

The engineer turned up another knob and listened again. "All I can hear," he said, "is rain. And a great deal of it."

The voice came back: "Feed Servex Interlock and see what that power failure does."

"Roger. I'm coming up to the main hall now."

"Roger," acknowledged the other voice, impersonally.

Chapter Twelve

For Stranger it might well have been a perfectly ordinary social evening. He liked the loose links he still maintained with the academic world; and Dr Irene Pellings, lecturer in modern languages and departmental head of the Language Laboratory, was an old friend from the Cambridge days. She had said on the phone: "Richard, it's just a small informal dinner."

"What's it for?"

"We'll think of something."

She did indeed think of something; for she was watching out for Stranger's car from a window in the lab. The casual interception was discreetly executed; but she closed the door of the lab firmly behind them before she explained its purpose.

Irene was unapologetically robust. Rude things were said, from time to time, about a certain lack of allure and on this subject she was as sensitive as the average battleship, which (at any rate in nature) she startlingly resembled.

Only the very young and the very ignorant were so foolish as to address Dr Irene Pellings at breakfast and they did so only once.

Now, Dr Pellings gestured like a policewoman towards the cubicles – twenty-eight in all – where language students normally sat with earphones clamped to their heads and tape recorders rotating on the little desks before them.

As usual, Dr Pellings was brief. In her clipped, military style she gave a sort of verbal Situation Report. "These, Richard, are teaching machines. The lecturer, who sits at the back of the room —"

"– Why the back, old thing?"

"I'm not an old thing and don't interrupt. The lecturer plays the teaching tape from his console at the back of the room, and this is automatically re-recorded by each individual machine – as you

see, all the cubicles have one. The lesson is, shall we say, in colloquial French; and there are spaces between each phrase. During these intervals, the students can record, on to their own tape machines, their own version of each phrase. They then wind back the tape and compare their pronunciation with that of the voice on the master tape. They can then erase their first effort – without erasing the teaching voice – and have another go. And so on . . . improving their pronunciation each time."

"Is all this *in vacuo*, darling?"

She threw him a breakfast look. "The lecturer can listen to any of the twenty-eight cubicles and check the progress of any student . . . There are many other things, more complex, that can be done with this equipment, but that is the basic principle."

"Does it work?"

"Yes – remarkably well."

Stranger threw his hands in the air and wiggled them. "Hurrah! May we now go and drink educational sherry?"

"Richard, will you never grow up? You know perfectly well I brought you here for a purpose."

"Good heavens."

"Yes. Good heavens . . ." She eyed him from the main forward gun turret, then led the way to the back of the room where the lecturer's console stood on a dais. "The console," she continued, "is at the back because students get self-conscious if it's in front."

"Why should they be any less self-conscious if it's at the back? They can still get caught if they pick their noses."

"Our students do not pick their noses, Richard. You're confusing us with your revolting Eton."

"I see, yes. We mustn't do that."

"Richard, I do wish you'd stop being frivolous . . . Well, using these various switches and things the lecturer runs the lesson – it's not nearly so impersonal as you might think . . . I mean, I know your views on electronic media."

"For instance, you know my views on words like media." He was delighted to see that she was becoming less crisp and more confused every moment.

"All right . . . Give me a better word."

"How about 'high definition non-linear serial-form semi-cluster-configuration single-field anti-dropoutistic communica-

tion?' . . . to use but a few of your electronic god's words for it?"

Dr Pellings was having great difficulty not to laugh. "Richard, to have got that off you must at least have *read* Dr Marshall McLuhan —"

"– Yes. Very multi-field stuff. Excessively linear, though . . . Sorry, dear. Please go on."

"Then we ordered some new tapes."

"From which source?" Stranger's mouth, traplike, lined the moustache into an extremely linear configuration which suddenly wasn't funny. "Or don't you know?"

"You seem to be anticipating me . . . You see, we think the tapes were switched."

"What's on them?"

"Superficially . . .? Just lessons. Very good lessons. In fact —" . . . and at this point the battleship was bow-on at full speed . . . "– in fact, quite *incredibly* good lessons."

"Yes?"

"Yes. Take the German phrases. How is it possible for a student to pick them up first time, memorize them, then use them, naturally, in conversation practice immediately afterwards?"

"The wonders of the electronic revolution know no bounds."

"*I* certainly don't know them," said Dr Pellings. "But I know enough to stop using these tapes – if it isn't already too late. Configurations – now, *there's* an interesting word."

"*Shape* means exactly the same thing, my love."

This time she didn't argue. "All right . . . *shape*. The *shape* of these sentences, the network of words from which they are constructed . . ." She chucked him a look and this was just plain scared. "There's significance in the *shape*. Can you see what on earth I'm trying to get at?"

"Let's hear one."

"You can't. I've erased them all. Last night I had every single machine in here working flat-out, just to wipe the whole bloody lot."

"Irene . . . What are you suggesting?"

She lit a cigarette neurotically. "Programming. These tapes could only have been manufactured by a computer . . . Richard, I mean a *speaking* computer . . . So certify me."

"What effect has it had on the students?"

She stared out of the window at a dark profile of Exeter. "They . . . *withdraw* . . . sort of."

" 'Sort of' doesn't sound like you!"

"It's hard to be precise. On the surface they're just the same. But underneath . . . there's a sort of hostile arrogance – contempt. They're learning something which I can't even hear."

"Are you sure there are no other sounds on the tapes? Have you tried running them at a slower speed, or —"

"– I've tried that, and so has my engineer. It's done with a network of words, Richard . . . Oh, it's true there's a slight 'hum' on the tape – you know. But you often get that. Even on a professional radio programme. But this 'word net' seems to —" she floundered. "Oh, hell. This must sound like rubbish, even to you!"

The muscular set of Stranger's jaw re-aligned the moustache. "Not rubbish . . . Did this all happen suddenly?"

"Something brought it to a head." She gestured towards a stack of tape-spools. "This batch came in yesterday. They were for one of the advanced modern-language groups. We used them in the normal way."

"And the effect wasn't normal?"

"Far from it!" She sat down at the console with a thud. "For a start, they turned viciously on me . . . and three of the students left the University – just like that!"

"Where did they go?"

"You guess . . . I don't know. But I knew something was wrong at once – from what they talked about in the discussion period afterwards."

"Well, what do they usually talk about?"

"Certainly not what they did . . . The period is supposed to be for practising colloquial speech. But yesterday they talked —"

"– Let me guess. About the court hearing into that air crash."

She stared at him. "How did you guess that? You must *know* that there was no mention of it – either on tee-vee or in the press – until this morning?"

"Nothing mystical about it – I calculated it. And I didn't use a computer, either. We mathematicians can still squiggle the occasional flash of genius."

Pellings nodded and said nothing, but crossed to a cabinet she kept locked. From it she took a wad of paper. Though glancing up at Stranger thoughtfully once or twice, she didn't speak until she laid out a dozen or so of the bits of paper on the console. Then: "These doodles are very muddled. But can you see any theme running right through them?"

"These were drawn by the students?"

A nod. "While they were actually working on the new tapes."

Stranger took his time. It was not easy. "They're very flowery . . . Were these all girls?"

"No. Mixed."

"Good heavens . . . All these scrolls and decorations. They're a bit sick, are they not?"

She said simply: "What do you see?"

"Eureka, I've got it!"

Pellings looked at him and saw that he had. As she collected them up again she said: "Now just *what* has a power pylon got to do with a major air disaster?"

On the way back from the University Richard had to pull up with a dangerous skid where the lanes divided. In the teeming rain a pair of ancient windscreen wipers had failed miserably to cope. He'd missed the accident-warning sign on the bend and now was almost on top of the ambulance and the police. Now, an officer broke away from the group near the flashing blue lamp and strode unhurriedly across as Stranger wound the window down.

"A bit fast for this time of night, aren't you?"

"Yes. Sorry."

"You won't get through this way. You'll have to go round via Dunchideock."

"What happened, officer?"

The policeman, drenched, looked hard at Stranger. "Someone driving even more . . . unwisely than you. May I see your licence, sir?" The policeman eyed Stranger's dishevelled suit and knew he'd been drinking.

"Unfortunately I haven't got it with me."

"I'll have to take down particulars. Perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me how much you've had to drink?"

"Probably more than I should, but I'm sober."

"Are you sure, sir?"

"I'm never sure of anything. I leave that to you. But if you want to write things down, hadn't you better get in the car? That notebook will get soaked."

"Yes . . . I'll do that, thanks." He got in. "May I ask where you've been?"

"The University. I drank quite well but ate much better."

"Oh . . ." The officer thought this out. "Perhaps you'd be good enough to let me see you reverse the car?"

"Certainly." Stranger started up. He was anxious. There had been a lot of wine and he knew his weakness. He was aware his breath was strong.

But he reversed successfully some twenty yards down a narrow lane with no reversing light and only the hedge to go on. "All right," said the officer gruffly, and looked at him: "You take my point, no doubt?"—witholding the Breathalyser.

"Yes. Thanks."

In answer to Stranger's questions the policeman said: "That bloke ahead . . . he must have been truly crazy."

"What happened? Do you know?"

The officer squinted through the streaming windscreen and beyond to the cluster of blue lights that flashed, rotating, on so many police cars.

"On the face of it, this poor devil seems to have put his foot down flat on the floorboards and drove straight through the hedge for the high-tension wires."

"Which?"

"You can't quite see them from here . . . But the eleven-thousand-volt system runs on wooden poles here . . . We have some engineers on the spot and that's what they tell me he hit."

"May I talk to them?"

The officer paused. "If you wouldn't mind, sir, I'd rather you didn't just now. There are quite a few things they have to attend to. Among other things your place – you *are* from the Freid Institute?"

"Yes."

"Your place is cut off from the power. We just came through there and – don't worry – they've got the engine going. As a

matter of fact their theory was that the transformer room was struck by lightning – but of course it must have been this."

"Is the driver dead?"

"Extremely. It's a pretty nasty mess, too – his car got welded to the electric cable. Quite a flash I should imagine." The officer prepared to get out.

Stranger delayed him. "Who was in the car?"

"We don't know."

"Was he badly smashed up? Could I recognize him?"

"You won't like it very much but you can try. You're thinking he might have been heading for your place?"

"It's possible."

They got out, went into the hammering rain. There was no point in running. You were drenched within seconds. Stranger asked: "What kind of car is it? – or was it?"

"A Ford Anglia."

Stan of the Musiconics had a Ford Anglia.

They approached the wreck. The whole chassis had hooped. Beyond it was the ambulance, but they hadn't yet managed to cut the body clear. Other police were measuring skid marks in the wet; but the nicks in the mud had filled up with water and the ground was levelling out. Broken wires lay spiralled in the marsh.

The policeman said thoughtfully: "We found something. It had catapulted from the car. Your people might be able to identify it. We can't." He talked with another policeman, who said, "I don't see why not as long as we get it back," and fetched something from one of the prowl cars parked ahead, while Stranger waited with the first policeman. They didn't talk, just peered in the bright glow of the floodlight and examined the blood-spattered human smashup which had now become an inextricable part of the steering wheel.

There was no doubt this was the bearded maestro.

The other officer returned, holding a small metal box. From it trailed an electric cable with a wall-plug on the end. There was also a pair of headphones attached. The thing seemed undamaged. This officer said: "Make any sense to you?"

Stranger examined it.

On the face of it, the device seemed incongruous.

It seemed to suggest that what you did was to listen to the main

electricity itself. For there was no aerial, no microphone, no other connections.

Stranger said: "Can we check this in our lab?"

"You're equipped for that sort of thing?"

"Very much so."

"Oh, yes . . ." The big policeman – the second one – seemed to remember something. "You people asked to examine something recently, didn't you? Let me see, what was it?"

The other policeman said quietly: "That chap they admitted to the psychiatric ward, in town."

"Oh, yes . . . Loss of memory, wasn't it?"

Stranger said: "Superficially."

The big man asked: "Why did you want his wristwatch?"

Stranger said: "Did you check it?"

"No. Why should we? It wasn't a police matter, except we found him wandering in the street."

"Did the hospital ask you to help identify him?"

"No. I understood they got on to you at the Freid. You seem to specialize in the . . ." he chose his words carefully: ". . . in the mental oddments, so to speak."

Stranger said: "From the way he talked we guessed he worked at some nuclear establishment . . . something like that. A power station, for instance."

"Why the watch?"

"Radio-active dust sometimes penetrates in minute quantities. It wouldn't stay on the clothes because they're invariably checked."

"Did you find any?"

"I don't know yet. It was being checked in a glovebox today."

The officer, who was no idiot, said: "Surely, if it were present in such dangerous quantities that you needed that sort of protection —"

"– It isn't that, it's the opposite. The quantities would be so small that you'd have to isolate it from the normal 'background-count' that comes from everything else."

"I see. Well, nobody has been reported missing from any known nuclear establishment."

"I know."

The big man turned his attention to the organic matter spattered around the inside of the car. "You know this man?"

"Yes. His name is Stan something-or-other."

"What do you know about him?"

"He's a musician."

"How did you get interested in him?"

"He was involved with some technologists who interest me. We have his photograph at the Institute. I've also seen him on television, making music. Not the sort you would like." The big man looked affronted, as if Stranger had assumed him ignorant of the classics. So Stranger added: "Electronic noises." – and the officer was mollified.

"Quite so. You'll let us know, will you, what that object is?"

"Certainly. If we find out."

"And get his second name, please . . ."

They helped Stranger turn and stood in a thoughtful, rain-soaked group as they watched his tail light disappear – at a modest pace – around the next bend.

When Stranger reached the Institute via the back way all he heard, between volleys of receding thunder and the relentless wash of rain, was the regular beat of the generator engine. It was evident that there was something wrong besides the power failure.

He could see that the door of Williams' hut/office was standing wide open with the lights blazing. Otherwise, down at shore level, all was in darkness. The street lighting – such as it was – had failed, of course, but the nurse wasn't in the staff cottage and Williams' wife wasn't to be found in hers.

When disturbed, Stranger was always very casual. He casually parked the car and he casually entered his own cottage (Peter wasn't there) where he casually stoked the dying fire and put some logs on it. Then he casually changed out of his suit into ancient grey flannel slacks which flapped around his ankles unfashionably and as he did this he glanced out of the odd-shaped little window up towards the hill. The lights were switched on in the foyer of the hotel. This was unusual. Those patients who were habitually moved to the bedrooms further back should have been tucked away by now; and those who – by Williams' orders – were not interfered with in any way should have been in darkness.

So Stranger plonked the odd-looking apparatus, the gadget the

police had found, on top of the rickety table; then put on a raincoat and set off (casually) out of the little front door and on up the hill.

The nurse, now alone in the darkness of the lab, saw the car lights down below and guessed that Stranger had returned from Exeter. And not before time; for the only person she was prepared to confide in – over certain, specific matters – was him. Pride stopped her saying anything much to Ham; and Dr Williams was somehow too distant and military, and Peter she utterly dismissed.

Sparks of lightning – quite a long way off now but still illuminating miles of countryside per flash – sporadically shimmered across the lab, throwing long shadows and – it seemed to her – featuring a different part of the place each time.

First, she noticed, the lightning caught a line of knobs on the little analog computer and threw their shadows on to the wall, where they looked to her not like knobs but like grotesque tumours growing from the wall itself.

Later another momentary flicker flashed on to a pair of brass scales and these, she was sure, rocked on their central pivot. She ran across and touched them and found them quite motionless; but the neat little stack of weights, large ones at the bottom and small at the top, seemed to throb in time with her heartbeat.

There came another flash and at that instant she turned.

It was the glovebox.

Suddenly, it seemed to her that those two horrifying hands were living. For with a metallic clatter they reached out violently, like angered things, seeking her out in the room like huge, glistening snapdragons in some technological jungle.

She backed away screaming and no one heard her because of the thundercrash that persisted long afterwards. Sobbing, she found the lightswitch . . . and that was when the lights actually came on in there.

And that was also when she realized that she must – she absolutely *must* make use of the Communication Unit, which of course nobody there knew she possessed.

She kept her Communication Unit, with its trailing electric lead and its set of headphones, at the back of the cupboard in which the coffee and biscuits and cups and all those things were kept. No one else went to this cupboard and in any case in the general muddle of

biscuit tins and tea caddies and bric-a-brac they wouldn't have seen it.

She realized, of course, that the Communication Unit was a kind of drug. She had always kept off drugs, too; even when, during the latter part of her training, there had been a good deal of illicit traffic in the amphetamines and hemp.

But this drug was quite different and of course nobody could really call it a *drug*. It just made her feel sort of *stronger*; and quite a few people were using them, or so she understood.

Besides, they were *secret*. It wasn't like all the other kicks, that were commonplace and almost dull, because *everybody* knew. You only had to go to one of those kinky parties in Chelsea or up in Liverpool (where she'd trained) to get handed LSD on lumps of sugar and (she congratulated herself) she'd jolly well kept off *that*.

Then this nice, educated chap with glasses – what *was* his name again? – had been at that party in Exeter. She had been with some pretty raw undergrads; but he'd taken her off in a corner and had talked about all sorts of exciting things she'd never heard of. He had seemed to know she worked at the Freid and he had some quite friendly things to say about Stranger and Williams but asked, wasn't it all rather *dull*?

Well, in some way (she forgot exactly how it came about) he got on to the drug thing and he said that was all old and boring and anyway, wasn't it dangerous . . .? But this *thing* really wasn't dangerous, since it was purely *emotional*. After all, how could it be otherwise, when all you had to do was to plug it into the electric supply and just listen . . .? So she'd borrowed it and he said it really didn't matter when she returned it as this one was a spare. She remembered she'd laughed at him because she didn't really think it could possibly *do* anything . . . I mean, it was just like listening to the radio, really, wasn't it? That's hardly a drug . . .

But it hadn't taken her long to find out that it was certainly effective. And though you couldn't really *hear* anything (except that humming noise you always get from a radio if you put your ear close enough) you certainly *felt* something and in some weird sort of way you always seemed to know what to *do*. All you had to operate, to make it work, was the red button on the top, which did something to make the "influence" (as this nice chap had put it) apply specifically to you.

So now she got the thing out of the cupboard – carefully avoiding looking at anything else in case a lightning flash made something else happen that shouldn't – and she plugged it into the wall and then she put on the headphones and then she pressed the red button on the top.

Well, she could hear the humming noise all right; but there was, quite obviously, something wrong with the Unit, because it just simply didn't do a *thing* for her . . .

Of course, it could not have done. For though the illegal signals sent by Servex along the powerlines throughout the world were accessible to anyone provided they were connected, the circuit breaker in the transformer room had cut her off. Supplying the electric power at this time was simply the emergency generator down below.

So when Richard Stranger entered the lab and saw at once what was happening and immediately put two and two together in his own mind and realized in the same thought-flash that it couldn't conceivably be working, he also realized that it was high time the Freid Institute got rid of the nurse.

Casually, smiling a little, he walked up to her and said: "That's an interesting-looking piece of equipment. You must tell me what it does."

And somehow it didn't in the least surprise Stranger that she immediately did something to the red button on top which destroyed it.

Because he had no doubt that this emergency action was built into whatever means of programming had been devised to ensure that she was addicted to the machine in the first place.

Back of the hotel was the hospital section – the part no one cared to talk about, simply because conventional methods of treatment had been so ineffectual. As Williams had once put it: "My toughest job is putting up with the charges of callousness and cruelty against myself. But where the nucleus of a disease lies in the patient's compulsive urge to take the least line of resistance, the only way to keep him alive and provide some chance of recovery is to refuse to allow him to do so." About society he would say: "We're pooling our cerebral resources and using machines as links, instead of communicating with each other lucidly and

developing our own minds that way while the machines do the work they're designed for. The truth is that the ordinary individual can't function without doing the dirty work; he can't learn without getting the jolts – he only gets brainwashed. Watch a child at play: he could never learn to walk if he didn't fall over."

. . . But right now there was plenty of activity in the hospital wing. Here Williams, with rolled-up sleeves, administered sedatives intravenously to those of the afflicted hotel guests who had suddenly gone berserk during the storm. Friend, for instance, had become epileptic. As a result he had ruptured himself . . . the tissue of walls, thin and weak from muscular disuse, had given way under stress.

The Italian girl, whom Peter was trying to marshall with the other bewildered creatures in the sickroom, now shot the bolt in his memory – the address on her index card gave it away, for it had her domiciled in Wardour Street, Soho. She was of course the sister of the girl who had been romping around late at night with her randy fiancé, and had probably spent too much time – initially out of idle curiosity? – gazing into the window of the computer centre. But tonight she had got trampled underfoot in the final, panicky stampede that had occurred just after the power failed. The X-ray showed a simple fracture of the leg. This Williams had already splinted and bound; and the sweat was pouring off his brow as he turned to deal with others who had minor injuries.

There being no time to deal with any psychiatric aftermath, Williams had ruthlessly resorted to massive doses of sodium amytal. Without the help of the nurse – whose collapse had, of course, been inexplicable – things were tough enough without the finer points. Apart from anything else you had to remember that every time you took an X-ray shot you had to turn every other piece of equipment in the place right off – the emergency generating plant just couldn't handle the load.

Into this front-line scene Stranger walked, making straight for Ham, who was temporary-acting radiologist. For this work Williams had to take the full responsibility, although the pat answer was to send the fracture cases into Exeter. He said: "And we all know what that would mean; there'd be an enquiry – and our work would be stopped just as we're beginning to get somewhere. Just remember, Ham . . . absolute *minimum* exposure

every time and watch the screening like you never watched anything before."

Stranger caught Ham between patients. "Ever seen a Communication Unit? – a little box with a pair of headphones and a secret message to boot?"

"Not *now*, Richard!" Ham propped up an oggling middle-ager unceremoniously in front of the fluoroscope and called Williams across before switching on. Peter, watching from the other light switches, slammed them all off and Williams snapped: "On now, five seconds."

The rib cage glowed into the darkness, heart pumping placidly.

"Off!"

Williams made a note on the card and said, "We'll strap that one," and Peter turned up the lights again. Ham turned to Stranger and said: "What's the nasty box do?"

"You guess."

"I dunno . . . Some kind of juke box that plays brains instead of records?"

"Good enough. And how can we be certain who has been listening to the music?"

The reply arrested Ham in the act of selecting a fresh X-ray plate. He stayed like that for five meaningful seconds, then slid the plate under the patient now on the adjustable slab. Winding the tube into position he dropped the plumbline and centred. As he looked down for checking the plate position his eyes fixed on the victim's face.

She was a female; and chemical changes caused by psychosis had puffed out the face so that the eyes had sunk. The girl could have been pretty, once.

Ham looked from her to Stranger, wondering how long it would be before the pretty little nurse might acquire the same look. Ham took the timer off the hook and set the dial. Without looking up again he said: "What are we going to do with her?"

Stranger: "Depends which way she swings. She either goes over to the Servex circuit or becomes a reject – like Sedgewick . . ."

Ham nodded to Peter across the way. Peter killed the other equipment so that Ham could draw the current.

A click and a deep humming and another click and that was it.

Up came the lights again. They'd really got it to a drill by now.

Ham said: ". . . or this girl right here," – he meant the nurse.

"Yes." Stranger heard a truck pull up outside, knew this to be the Electricity Board engineers. He helped Ham draw out the exposed plate. "We don't want them to get too interested."

"There's some beer, down in my cottage, Richard. That might absorb some attention."

"I'll make use of it." Stranger paused in the act of leaving. "Talking of rejects, friend Stan of the Musiconic Movement was evidently making for this place."

"Was?"

"He hit the powerline just outside Ide. The police say he was doing sixty along a mud lane. Any questions?"

Not until two a.m. was comparative peace and order restored to the Freid Institute. For reasons which neither Stranger nor Ham Nichols could know, Williams called a meeting which – oddly – was to take place inside Stranger's car, which had been carefully searched by Peter a few minutes before.

Williams, in his most staccato manner, invited Peter to outline his discovery. Peter explained about the mike in the wooden shack, went on to describe where else he'd searched. Nobody commented on the obvious fact that every single thing of any importance that had ever been said at the Freid must have been overheard by Servex since the time the mikes had been planted.

Ham asked: "What about tonight? Could they know we found the other thing? – the box of tricks Sue was using?"

Peter said shortly: "There were no bugs in the hospital section."

Ham: "In which case they must know we hardly ever use it. They must know a lot, by now."

Stranger rubbed his moustache, which always seemed to itch when he had an idea. "Whatever they may have heard," he said, "they will dismiss as utter poppycock. The motivations we know about are deeply subconscious. All they *think* they're doing is developing a new, computerized technology. Take Verolde. He uses the Servex facilities to make money, pure and simple."

Williams affirmed with a nod. "On the surface, that's true. We're discussing madness – a new kind of madness I admit, but madness just the same. That means, no insight. No self-truth."

Ham coughed cynically. He had never subscribed to this idea.

"Just you tell *me*, Professor, how they can possibly *not* know what's going on? The logical steps they take to intimidate; the planned distribution of things like that hot-box Sue was using? The sheer secrecy of their operations . . .?" He glanced at Peter. "That cable you found, down in Porthcurno . . . What's that supposed to be for? They must be fully aware of its purpose."

Williams gestured mildly and took over the answer. "Ham, I know you don't accept my theories – nor Richard's. Maybe it's a good thing someone doesn't. It means we have to sharpen our own reasoning processes. Indeed, if they don't function properly we are no saner than the opposition.

"But let's take your three points in order and consider how subtle the intimidation; how easily they could come to accept their own twisted reasoning. First, Sedgewick; well . . . they'd say he was probably latently unstable for a long period. The additional strain, caused by the breakup of his romance with that secretary of his, pushed him out of line. He's so ill the company – very decently – fly him to a special clinic . . . for who does not go to Switzerland for their health? Or take Peter: he molests a girl against her will – sorry, Peter! – and the girl quite plainly doesn't want to see him. She makes this obvious in front of witnesses, at the time of Sedgewick's death.

"Or take Stan, who dies tonight. Driving dangerously and out of control in the rain . . . like a lot of other people who die on the roads."

Ham: "But then the object flies out of his car."

Williams: "The object isn't illegal."

Stranger: "If the object is for picking up signals illegally transposed on to the powerlines, that might be our first breakthrough."

Williams: "If it isn't too late to start a breakthrough."

Ham: "Do you think that? – seriously?"

"There's no direct evidence. And we don't know what would happen if things *did* hot up. We don't know their motive and nor do they."

A short silence. Then Peter said tonelessly, thinking, as he was, more about his own helplessness concerning Christina than he was of these deductions: "The explanation of the cable business could be as Forbes described to me."

Ham said sarcastically: "Yeah. It could." The match he struck

for a cigarette flared up and lit four troubled faces in close proximity. "Well, I'd give a lot to know what your General Trefathick would think of us now . . .! Four guys, packed like sardines in a parked automobile in the middle of a rainstorm, talking like characters out of a Fellini movie and consulting the projectionist over the plot . . . How can we be sure we're making any sense?"

Williams glanced across and without guile said: "Ham, it's your money. If you aren't sure, you must withdraw it. It would be irresponsible not to do so."

Stranger, not nearly so guileless in the way he timed his moments, looked nonchalantly out of the window towards the reservoir and remarked with huge innocence: "Naturally, we must be wrong. Ham is right. We've boobed. There must be some perfectly simple explanation of the fact that twenty-eight beheadphoned zombies at Exeter University, plied as they were with computerized information on tape, knew the findings of the air crash hearing even before the press did."

Ham pushed his glasses up over his brow and rubbed his eyes. "Where do these zombies hang out?"

"In a language laboratory." He said deadpan: "The place is not normally associated with psychic phenomena."

There came a pause.

Ham said: "Sorry, fellas. It's just every now and then it all seems so goddam improbable."

"Which," said Stranger, "is precisely how it works." Four car doors opened simultaneously. "Anyway," continued Stranger, "one thing's certain: there's no way in which those mikes could have revealed that Peter discovered them."

. . . And it's curious that Stranger didn't see the fallacy of this particular statement. A computer is impervious to those emotions which enable us to be actors, and so delude our fellow human beings.

For two people at the Freid Institute knew about the microphones that evening: Peter, and then Williams, whom Peter had immediately informed. Thus a subtle change had occurred to an established behaviour pattern.

This change was undetected by those at the Freid who didn't know until the conference in the car.

All the same, many miles away, deep within an underground

control centre which lay at the end of a communications link with the concealed microphones, a red light had started flashing on a panel, approximately fifteen minutes after Williams had been told.

For a different choice of words had been made by those at the Freid who knew; and these had evinced altered reactions in the others, even though they didn't.

The flashing red light, therefore, came on over that section of the control panel, over at Servex, marked *paradox*.

Part Three

STRANGLEHOLD

Chapter Thirteen

AND paradox is the key to insanity. You feel one thing and you think the other. You believe what your instincts declare false; and severing your intellect from your being mind, you allow it to be pummelled by propaganda until it is numbed. It is washed whiter than white; and whether the message is desperate and hippy and LSD, or whether it's cold and calculating and commercial, your mind does the splits trying to believe it, until its crotch scrapes the ground and all things apply together, because you have to go on living.

Now, the machine steps in; and in weighing the incompatible odds, creates new incompatibles. It churns out facts in its ignorance of truth, till we ourselves forget what truth is for.

Christina, as she walked now along a dark, rain-glistened street, was us, was you, was me. She didn't ask questions of herself because questions meant pain. If she attempted even to consider any pre-pylon memory, a screaming sound slammed through her brain. This street – Trumpington Street . . . these ancient, beautiful buildings . . . the name of the town on the ticket, issued to her at Liverpool Street Station . . . all these she must ignore, and walk on.

True, the methods of indoctrination used upon Christina were more sophisticated, more detailed, more electronic, than the politicians and the advertising agencies can normally deploy; but this was a mere matter of degree . . . Christina was us, was you, was me.

Eventually she saw a glow ahead, and she knew somehow that she was meant to see this glow. So she increased her pace, and listened to her own footsteps as they echoed and re-echoed from the walls of these gracious-looking buildings which she knew she wasn't allowed to look at properly.

And she came to this radio shop.

In the window were five television sets, all of them switched on. And she did find herself wondering why she was meant to be looking at them because at this time of night there was no actual picture to look at, but only the glow from the blank screens. She reasoned that these sets were normally on display, and that the people who owned the shop did not stay up late enough to switch them off when the programmes were all over. She reasoned this, like all other matters, like an obedient child.

And, like an obedient child, she stood there, quite still, in the pouring rain, and stared into the window.

And in return, a remote-controlled tee-vee camera, mounted, along with sound equipment, in a way very similar to the setup in Soho, London, gazed back at her, and sent its findings along a coaxial cable to some further equipment deep underground. Here, a green light flashed *positive identification*, but it was not the only light that flashed on the panels below.

The man sitting next to John Forbes at one of the informator consoles drew his attention to the intermittent red light that had come up at the *paradox* position. Actually, neither man thought this particularly important, because the paradox indication was intended – normally – to reveal "chattering", due to some minor fault, in a flipflop – a two-way electronic switch which was improperly flipping and then flopping back between its two possible positions. The cure was to knock it out altogether and simply cut a new unit in. The defective unit would then be located by an engineer as a part of daily maintenance routine, slid out of the racks, and sent along to workshops for repair. In the meanwhile another one would be inserted in its place.

On this occasion Forbes said irritably: "Leave it!" and paid close attention to the television screen overhead. This monitor showed what was being picked up by the tee-vee camera concealed in the shop window, two hundred feet overhead, and now showed a close-up of Christina. With this, a green light came up on the Locator panel; which would have been all right but for the fact that another flipflop went berserk at the same moment. On the panel they now had one steady green and two flashing reds. The man next to John said: "Funny."

John was unconcerned. Actually he was smiling slightly, for it

was gratifying that Christina's response to the program conveyed over telephone line to the Station Manager's Office in Paddington Station (identical with the type of signal more usually sent to Communication Units) had been exactly as predicted.

"We've got her," said John, and the man next to him, the nondescript named Stewart Fellowes, glanced at him briefly.

Fellowes said: "But will she know how to get in?"

John said: "She's on *hold*. Entrance requires an additional instruction." But he'd seen something else on the screen and said "Ah!" Then he pressed the *human-override* button – which meant that the camera could be moved by him at the console instead of by its own automatic controls. Swinging the camera slightly left, he focused on the image that had been at the very edge of the frame a moment before. "An officer of the Law!" said John, sardonically. "This should make for some good viewing!"

Fellowes said: "He's coming across!"

"Then I wouldn't be him."

"Why?"

John kept his eyes riveted on the screen. "She's conditioned to reject all-comers. Watch!"

The policeman felt a raindrop that had found its way inside his collar. As he crossed the street towards this drenched female who didn't seem to know what on earth she was doing, he worked out very carefully where the raindrop was in relation to his spine, so that the itch could be remedied instantly by a precision-scratch.

The scratch was an instant success; and it occurred exactly three unhurried policeman-strides before he reached the shop window. There he halted – perplexed.

For her eyes were reflected back from the glass. And in this fluorescence these eyes looked hypnotized . . .

The instruction received by Christina's brain had been word-coded. Though not actually signalled to her in the form of holes on a punch-card, the program was concise. Certain animals may be trained, through continued conditioning, to respond to cues contained in simple sentences. The sentences are window-dressing; what counts is the key contained therein.

Thus Christina had received, in her mind, a whole series of apparently innocuous statements over a period. Buried in them, however, were certain constantly repeated cue-words which, by

means of computer-analysis, had been predicted as particularly effective for her particular personality.

Certain words mean more to some than to others. The late Senator McCarthy responded to the word *red*. Thus the phrase "the sky is red" would have had, for him, a heavier significance than for a less-disturbed personality.

The computer already "knew" the reactive areas of Christina's mind. It "knew" that, since Ding Dong, she had accrued strong emotions associated with words like *diamond* (the diamond-shaped cable sign). The word *mine* had like significance. In combination: *diamond-mine*. Elaboration: *mine of information*.

Programming had been carried out by Communications Unit both at Ding Dong and at the Randolf Hotel. The word *diamond*, in various configurations of meaning, had been incorporated 236 times over a period of two weeks. The word *mine* appeared in various phrases 195 times, and the computer had automatically assembled the rest of the "word-net" in a similar way, so as to direct Christina across the continent from the Clinic of the Snows all the way over to a certain street in a certain town at a certain time, here in England.

Over the shop the neon sign, displaying the name of the shop, read: *Diamond Radio and Television Ltd* – and the rest was virtually guaranteed.

The policeman, easing forward a little, took a closer look at her face, lighted as it was from the ghostly glow on the tee-vee faces of the cathode ray tubes in the window.

Forbes, succulently watching all this on his monitor screen, grinned slightly as the policeman prepared to speak. "You'll wish you hadn't chum!" he remarked, really for the benefit of Fellowes, who clearly didn't understand what was going on.

Christina's brain now received, upon the slight forward movement of the policeman, a stored piece of information which was activated by the policeman's very movement.

REJECT INTERFERENCE WHEN LOCKED-ON TO SERVEX

With a friendly smile the policeman said: "Filthy night, Miss!"
"Is it?" – the voice: cutting, curt.
"I would have thought so," said the policeman, less expansively.

"Hadn't you better be getting on home? Both of us don't have to put up with it, you know!"

Forbes: "Now, watch! She wants to tell him, but can't."

Fellowes: "Tell him what?"

Forbes: "Something on her mind. Peter Shackleton is there, somewhere behind the mental block . . . I'll show you that in a minute."

"But will she —?"

"– Just watch!"

Christina turned slowly and looked at the policeman for several seconds.

Inside herself she seemed to feel two separate reactions, and at first they both wanted to come at once.

Then a cerebral flipflop within her held firmly in position.

With all the malice and hatred that could ever get into a female voice, she said: "I advise you to stop pestering me. You may be in uniform but that doesn't change anything."

The policeman was a reasonable man. He had a wife and two kids and was approximately constant most of the time. He was not easily angered by troubled people.

Yet, beneath the globules of rain on his face, a red hue began to develop fit to melt water into steam. "We'll pretend that wasn't said, Miss. But unless you can tell me where you're going and what you're doing I may have to take action. You *can* be taken in as a vagrant, you know."

"If you're threatening me . . ."

The policeman found himself suddenly bored. He knew a certain frigid type of bitch who could play actress so well that things could get quite rough on the carpet next day. Despite her looks, she wasn't worth the trouble. "In your own interests, I should be very careful what you say to a police officer. We're only human and we have our duty. I suggest that you go on home."

With this he strode away, and made a mental note to be nicer to his wife at breakfast. She was a damn nice girl.

Christina continued to stand motionless.

Panning the camera by means of the controls on the console, Forbes, grinning, followed the policeman as he continued on his beat.

"All right!" said John. "We'll have an emotional lift-off."

"I wouldn't risk it, John. It's not necessary."

John Forbes said: "People who know me better do not tell me what to do and what not to do."

Stewart Fellowes, nondescript component of a master/slave relationship, looked sullen.

He had always felt somehow unmanned by this upstage intellectual, felt that the sadism so apparent in Forbes' attitude towards the Subject-girl was at least equally directed towards him. "Supposing you can't put it back again?"

"So little faith . . .?" Forbes pressed the button labelled *telecine* – and suddenly there on the screen was what he had captured on celluloid on the slopes of Stradt. In distorted perspective, the base of the pylon hogged the picture, till a shifted camera showed Peter Shackleton ascending the superstructure. Tottering up there somewhere was Sedgewick himself, slithering on icespars. Striped pyjamas were his only protection against the freezing wind.

From the console, both this and the image of Christina, as she stood in the street, were visible side by side on two screens.

You could see how Christina's face began to soften, how she hugged herself as if remembering the cold. She was breathing at a different rate as if from exertion; standing with weight differently distributed, as if on skis. The picture, on all five screens before her, multiplied its significance by five and now showed Peter pulling himself up to a higher girder.

Forbes watched her intently, and leaned momentarily forward to adjust the contrast control. To Fellowes he said quietly: "Preconditioning material – it's a kind of 'emotional-override' . . . At this time Peter Shackleton *dominated* the pylon."

"How?"

"Simply by climbing it."

Fellowes watched her on the other screen. She seemed suddenly more composed, not tranquil, but rather contemplative. "I'd give a lot to know what she's thinking now!"

. . . The voice came to Christina, quite audibly, quite plainly now, from some region in the back of her head.

It did not frighten her, this hallucination. It was, though, a terrible relief . . . for the voice did not blame her.

It was a sad, slow voice; a voice for tears. It said: "I was

Christina. I have no place in this my head. It is a human brain; and yet it is a great office, a great wide place full of filing cabinets and empty coffee cups and smart shoes on a shiny floor.

"In this office, the Central Brain Office, men are at work. They stand, in uniform, in a long, disciplined line. This brain, which was my own, is theirs to tend. With precision, each lobe a separate department, the men do their routines. They have their punch-cards in filing-hands, with which to make me seem real. They slot them into stacks and watch them becoming my thoughts and my deeds and my hopelessness. Lines and lines of men are infesting the memory-corridors, being remembered.

"All the time, crammed into some forgotten thought-nucleus, I watch and listen and with constricted cells I try to think. That fragmented Self still cares and loves; and it is I, Christina.

"It is very small. It is smaller than each one of the men inside my head. And it hides in the dark; running out of cells, running out of thought.

"How many more thoughts dare I think now, before they are all used up forever? How much tape have they left me in my head-machine? Enough to think, just several thoughts more, of Peter?

"Did he ever know how little there was of me left, I wonder? Did he know how I was cringing – even then, that day – in this one old-fashioned cubbyhole in an otherwise totally modernized brain? Could he have guessed how despairingly grateful I was that once – just for a few seconds – he actually touched me? Yes . . . Are you listening, Brain? He reached my breathing mind; this stuffy little part of you, Big Brain!, that you so despise! Am I an embarrassment to you, I wonder? How soon will it be, when one of those prim experts, out there in my Main Control Room, thinks of cleaning out this tiny compartment, to instal in here some costly piece of cerebral equipment?

"I think . . . I am running out of thought-tape. I think I shall then no longer exist. I shall therefore preserve, for my forgotten lifeline, a few more turns of the spool, just so I can show this half per cent of love of which I am still capable. Peter? Will you know it's there? Please God, will you know?"

Fellowes said: "But she's not doing anything!"

"I know . . . Habit, I suppose. She just doesn't want to."

Forbes stopped the film, feeling it had all fallen a little flat. "Oh, well, even Pavlov didn't know how to do it back to front."

So Forbes pressed the shop-door release; and as if it were by her natural will, Christina entered the premises of Diamond Radio and Television Ltd.

A voice-instruction automatically guided her to the lift.

Computers react fast, sometimes in nanoseconds. To a complex situation, involving many interlocked circuits via cables halfway across the world, they take a little longer.

There was a fifteen second timelag, in fact, between the appearance in Servex, England, of the second flashing light and the equivalent display in America. In Washington, however, the reaction wasn't merely limited to a warning signal; for due to something which at this time wasn't apparent either to Forbes or to Fellowes or to any of the engineers at that location, General Trefathick, a very worried man at this moment, phoned a certain number from Washington and via the Servex communications network raised Verolde on his car radio-telephone. Verolde was returning from a dinner party near Regent's Park when the call came through. Trefathick told him he was leaving Washington immediately and would be on the first available flight to England. Would Verolde meet him at the airport?

There was no question that this was an order. Verolde agreed to be at the Atlantic Building at Heathrow in time for the morning arrival.

Bluff General Trefathick wasn't quite so bluff to those few who knew him well. He had a past to account for which, though it did not comprise one of those Washington skeletons so prone to plummeting out of cupboards and taking other people's bones with them, left some big question marks in the minds of those that knew. None knew better than George Verolde how this torment from the past had nearly ended a fine military career; for Verolde, who made a science out of being useful to those in high places who might return his favours at some future time, had provided the cure.

And as Verolde sat in the V.I.P. lounge on this very cold morning approaching Christmas he reflected on it.

For Trefathick, though of dubious sexual capacity, had been

running a mistress, back in 1962, at the time when he and Verolde happened to be guests at the same conference. Verolde was not the only man present, either, who was perplexed at the General's nervous condition. Hesitantly, quite without his customarily decisive manner, Trefathick had stumbled through the day's agenda – the occasion had been an admittedly farcical symposium on the future of satellite communications . . . farcical, because at that time nearly everything useful was a military secret – and retired from the scene before dinner.

Verolde, not one to miss an opportunity, had done some background work, and, choosing his moment, approached the General at a certain Long Island swimming club while the General stared disconsolately at his mistress, who happened to be some distance away while her bikini was hungrily fingered by someone who looked a lot more adept at such things than did the General.

The General had eyed George Verolde across the sunbaked lido after receiving the note handed him by a waiter. The General had then indicated that he was willing to talk, which he did with an upward glance from a very flat deck chair, thick sunglasses, and a Tom Collins in status-orientated juxtaposition.

"You get around," said the General, peering up as Verolde stood over him. "Haul up a chair and tell me why you're interested. Up till now it had not occurred to me that the private life of a soldier was any concern of a tycoon."

Verolde didn't answer directly, accepting rather the drink soon offered, and peering thoughtfully across at the girl. He himself happened to think she was a very ordinary-looking girl.

But he said: "How would you like to be immune?"

The General didn't move from his rock-steady consortium with gin and rocks. "Very much. Why?"

"I can arrange it."

The General crossed hairy legs over the other way. "Tell me more . . . That is, provided it doesn't involve actual castration."

Verolde said: "You realize I'm serious?"

He got a short, sharp laugh. "I assure you this is a serious business, Verolde! If you don't believe me, ask a few anxious occupants of the Pentagon. Half of them know my wife, who is plotting to have me booted."

"Aversion treatment," said Verolde . . .

The wife had ceased to promote the Order of the Bowler Hat and for a time all had been serene. The mistress – not quite so pleased – had faded into oblivion. Her only consolation was that the aversion treatment – which involved heavy-handed brain-washing backed up by an emetic on the production of an allegedly alluring photograph of the lady in question – was quite exceptionally unpleasant.

Nobody, of course, had doubted the word of the highly-qualified psychiatrist that there would be no untoward side-effects . . .

Later, the General found increasing cause for regretting the friendship with Verolde, who, though tactful enough to get government contracts without his participation, proceeded as soon as he had signed them to use the General for purposes for which, strictly speaking, generals were not designed. More than once Trefathick found his name had been quoted and used over policy decisions with which Verolde – somehow – had been associated; and the incipient scandal over favouritism concerning some radar tenders in '64 needed constant pruning, like an enthusiastic but hideous flowering shrub that, whatever you did to it, simply would not die.

The dirty-joke background to the whole association did not help, either; for somehow a distorted version of the emetic saga had leaked through to a few cynical colleagues, one of whom had quipped: "I see, Trefathick, that they didn't manage to make you averse to radar." Fortunately the Army – with their views on High Treason – couldn't afford to admit there was any such thing as brain-washing, and the rumours left over from the General's wilting salad days were, on the whole, flattering . . .

There was nothing facetious now in the General's manner as he stepped into the V.I.P. lounge. He omitted any greeting, but snapped: "Did you bring your car?"

"It's outside."

"Put me inside it. Then we'll talk."

It was chauffeur-driven, and the General asked: "This thing have mikes anywhere?"

"Of course not."

"No of course about it."

Verolde slid the glass partition tight shut. "What's on your mind, Cleve?"

"I'm going to ask you a question and I expect a direct answer. So don't let's beat about the bush." He turned to face him. "George, what is Servex?"

Verolde said mildly: "It's just a word . . . more or less like cybernetics, but as you know, cybernetics is no longer considered respectable."

"Is Servex any more respectable?"

Verolde grinned, biting on a cigar. "It is, at any rate, far more exclusive."

"You still haven't told me what it means."

"It's simply a computerized link-up for the benefit of industries . . . a centralizing of industrial communications."

"Except no industrialist I know will ever talk about it," snapped the General. "Except that it's quite impossible to spot what lies within Servex as opposed to without. Except that when people ask questions they get the snappy-catch-answer that some kind of military project is involved, so no information can be given."

Verolde lit his cigar. "General, when you phoned me in the middle of the night, your call eventually got put through to my car. To get the communications centre in question, you had to ask for a certain number. Now, you know very well that that number is also one of the numbers you call if you want someone who happens to be absent when you try NATO headquarters. In other words, that number can raise pretty well anyone you want, almost at any time, and in complete secrecy . . ."

"Yes, I know. But are you saying —?"

Verolde, quietly: "Hear me out, General. Is that number listed anywhere as Servex . . .? That's what I mean by saying that Servex is only a word. Another word for communications, really."

The General glowered angrily at a radio aerial the far end of the airport and clung to the elegant bit of rope as the driver swung the car viciously round the one-way system on the Bath Road.

However you asked the question, there didn't seem to be a way of answering it and this thing made him feel hysterical and – come to think of it – nowadays he often did. So he took a hold on himself.

"Look, George," he said, lowering his voice with an effort, "I've tried to trace this damn thing before. But apparently it's impossible to work out what is controlled by or through or with this Servex and what isn't. Now, take the new dam project up at Tyrone Falls . . . I could take a lot of other things that I think – or should I say I *hope*? – would startle you. But I won't; because they're top secret. Top secret!" he exclaimed as if the word no longer meant what it said. "So . . . we take the dam." He stared at Verolde. "I tell you, you can't *tell* how it's controlled! The thing goes around in a circle. Look . . . the electrical side of the automating is controlled by the InterState Power Company of Oklahoma. Right. That settles that. Only does it? The InterState Power Company of Oklahoma happens to share computing facilities with the Bona Dam Control Corporation, upstate and upriver. But they have no business deal with InterState. Both dams affect the flow of the river. And the water level is always maintained correctly. But is the river working the dams? – or are the dams working the river?"

Verolde blew smoke. "Does it ever go wrong?"

"Nope. Not so far. For God's sake it better not, either. Study the lie of the land. It does not only contain hydro-electric schemes, George."

"I know that."

"Nearly every industry within a radius of two hundred miles is *inter-controlled*. And there's no centre of it. Nothing to keep the thing in hand. *Each* controls the *other* – marketwise, productionwise, organizationwise – and yet nobody will admit it! Each unit *thinks* it has independent control! Except they dare not switch things off, for fear that the river will go over its banks, or there'll be a national spread of power failure, like the one we had a few years back in New York and further out. George, they *know*! They know they're dependent on . . . well, God knows what! A sort of way of averaging things out that you can't interfere with and can't even trace . . . And don't sit there telling me that nothing goes wrong. Something *is* going wrong; and it started last night."

Verolde, for the first time, looked disturbed. "Like what?"

"George, we think there's a back way around, that's suddenly started, which is going to drive the economy crazy. I repeat, it's only just started . . . you'll see the beginnings of it in the shares

index on most international markets today. It's a kind of chain reaction, only it's a circle, if you follow me. And the point is this: we can't interfere with production levels, for the reasons I've just given. The thing daren't stop! And until we can find a control *centre* we can do nothing."

Verolde asked immediately: "How does this concern the war department?"

"All right, you asked. I'll do my best to answer. The other day I was handed a report. For all I know you've *seen* the damn thing ... one never knows. Not now." He continued, emphasizing cardinal words with his fist on the armrest. "That report deals with defence communications. It goes into the facilities available, that kind of thing.

"George, *we're* interlocked! In exactly the same way! So who's to know? Think as far ahead as one of my colleagues did yesterday. Suppose some crazy kink in this vast system forges a link with Russia? Or China? Suppose it works out that one way of balancing world economy is *war*? No don't look at me like that – it could just be. We have population explosions and all the rest of it. What if the complicated ramifications of defence schemes at one end are integrated with missile sites on the other? Maybe you think it sounds hysterical and maybe it is. But what a nightmare handshake it would be, wouldn't it, if this thing made a decision to lob missiles across the Pacific, to satisfy the requirements of both ends? —or even started firing those orbiting space-bombs?"

Verolde grinned hard. "Cleve, you need a rest. You've seen too many Science Fiction movies. What you're saying is that computers are taking over the world."

"What I'm saying is far closer to home than that, George. I'm saying that men keep building machines and they keep linking them up – every which way – until it's simply too complicated to figure how they interact. It's inevitable ... like one of those crazy mixed-up economic problems in which everything causes everything else to slide, but without any reason other than the fact that they are connected – in that case by convertible currencies. In *this* case the connection is through direct, electronic means. Who's to say what happens once it starts to get top-heavy and goes out of control? One tiny bump in the system at some remote point, and the bump starts travelling along the lines."

"And you're saying this is happening now?"

"I'm saying that the ripple has started. Somehow. And I'm saying, George, that since no one knows where or what Servex is – or where it's centre is, if it's even *got* one! – it simply cannot be stopped!"

Chapter Fourteen

WHEN you're eleven years old it's all so obvious.

Lizbet, the little girl who on this day ran into the Clinic of the Snows on one of her frequent visits to Theresa (whom she adored) knew, the moment she saw Sister Mary Wilhelmina, that something was terribly wrong.

Lizbet's daddy – the guide at the dam – had told her *particularly* not to go to the clinic any more; but Lizbet, who had a will of her own, would obey no such order – especially as her daddy had become so strange and distant and secretive . . .

Not that she blamed him. For Lizbet had no mummy, and she didn't think that daddy was really married anyway. You get lonely, like that. And daddy hadn't even got Sister Theresa to talk to, except the other day at the powerhouse (he'd told her) . . . and come to think of it that was the day daddy had got so strange.

Sister Mary Wilhelmina said tersely: "She's in town."

"Why?"

"She's doing the Christmas shopping."

"Can't I make the coffee for the patients?"

"Not today, Lizbet. We're rather busy."

"Well, all the more reason for me to —"

" –I said *no*."

"Where will I find Theresa in Stradt?"

"*Sister* Theresa, Lizbet."

"*She* doesn't mind."

"Anyway, you're not to come up here any more."

"Why?"

"Because your daddy says so."

Lizbet looked uncompromisingly at her. "You told him to," she said.

Theresa would have been in no mood to see Lizbet just then. For with a raucous squelch of torn rubber the Aston-Martin roared down the last section of the pass road, nearly scraped the purple sign with the cocktail glass on it, and with brakes slammed on, skidded across the snow to the ice rink and screeched to a standstill only inches away from where she was standing.

Recklessness seemed to be on the upsurge all around. For as the doors flew open to excrete Tom Dick and Harry, a departing mob, packed hair-raisingly into an open car, executed a crazy, snow-churning swerve and narrowly missed them. Cadaverous grins seemed to split the victims' faces as they yelled appreciative abuse. No one seemed to care when the open car crumped sidelong against a parked Porsche and rammed this one into its neighbour. Tom Dick and Harry goof-grinned at Theresa; and Tom, silky-loose hair flopping inanely, cracked something about nuns with dirty habits. The threesome sent up a coarse-grained laugh that matched the shrill pseudo-music and the scything of skates. Then they went through the barriers and left Theresa on her own.

Sister Theresa caught herself feeling thoroughly sanctimonious about this new-style revelry and resolved to say a prayer or two to make up for it. She had no idea why she felt this way – why she forgot that the colossal pressures in a hostile environment could make apparent morons out of basic human material; that youth could be converted into a smashing-up machine, reaping havoc in the form of despairing vandalism or outright brutality. The rage of the helpless and the stricken had never before antagonized her in this way. But she couldn't see it. Not then.

She felt that Christmas had been brutalized and that a small manger with a baby in it had been upset in the dirt of the stable. She was incensed with hate instead of moved by compassion. And if the child – Lizbet – had appeared at that moment she would have sentenced her to the same black future as the mood of the threesome symbolized.

Paradoxically, she hated taking this view but was unable to do anything about it. She tried resolutely to admire the flaming neon signs whose reflection glared up from sheet ice; she did her best to satisfy herself that one is only young once (except that many of the occupants of this particular nursery looked as if they'd out-

grown the toys) and that indiscretion was better than hypocrisy. 'But why do they call it *Christmas*?'

God had nothing to say on this point.

Ralstein, the Rabbi, ran into her in the darkened street not far from the rink and greeted her. His own expression, structurally precise and bony in the harsh glare of mercury-vapour street lighting, was inscrutable. "But I know what *you're* thinking, all right!"

"Then I must be getting old," said Theresa, automatically.

He grimaced, hands and lips alike. "Ah, but it's your Christmas, not mine! Passover isn't nearly so noisy . . . even though it does tend to coincide with all those chocolate Easter bunnies – which are, it's true, more your fault than mine."

Theresa took the point tacitly. "As a matter of fact, Rabbi, there was something I wanted to talk to you about."

"Then let us, by all means, go somewhere where it's possible to hear ourselves speak . . ." He glanced at the seething mob of revellers around him. "Sometimes I get the impression that Christmas is the responsibility of Saint Walt Disney – but equally I suppose my big tall hat must look comical to them!"

She didn't smile, and Rabbi Ralstein found himself looking at her anxiously as they strolled together through the holiday-makers. "There's no one in the bus shelter," he said, "we'll talk there."

Theresa's odd mood was even more noticeable when Lizbet ran up to greet them; for she muttered, "I'll go on ahead," greeted the child perfunctorily, and darted in behind a party who, linking arms, brisked past the perimeter of the illuminations on the grounds of the skating rink. One girl in the group caught Theresa's expression in that fraction of a second and grimaced to her boy friend. "If that's holy I don't want to know," she said.

The Rabbi lifted Lizbet high in the air. "And what, my child, are you doing around here, this time of night?"

He knew Lizbet by sight, had seen her out and about on casual sprees, often enough, with Theresa. He knew that her father was one of the dam people who lived in one of those gloomy cottages back of the movie-set high street. In these crumbling places, where tourists never penetrated, lay concealed some of the grimmer realities of Stradt – the narrow, flagstoned streets, the

drooping electrical wiring, the eternal, pungent smell of cooking that clung to the cracks in the walls. Sparse streetlamps, illuminating the uneven paving at the corners, gave the district a yellow, tarnished look.

The child wasn't tarnished; but rather possessed one of those glistening, alive-type faces which look up at you and laugh.

He set her down and she wasn't laughing now. "What's *wrong* with everybody? Even Theresa . . . She looked at me in a funny way."

"She's very tired."

"Oh, I'm sorry. That's different." She looked again, kicked a trough in the snow. "When will she be all right again?"

"Why don't you go and see her at the clinic tomorrow?"

"They said I can't. Not any more."

"Who's they?"

"Mary Wilhelmina. She's an old —"

"– But surely, it's up to Sister Theresa, isn't it?"

The child glanced towards the bus shelter. "She's not just tired, Mr Rabbi. She's *different*!" – and Lizbet turned and ran away.

The bus shelter lay flat like a powder-box, under the floodlit trees beyond the chair-lift terminal. Here, the predominant sound was the thunderous cascade of the powerhouse outlet. Though nearly a quarter of a mile off it made the ground vibrate. The sensation of power came up through your feet. The other way, seen through the single-paned window that ran half the length of the shelter, lay the village, beyond the turgid activities on the ice, and built on the slope facing the ski runs. You could not, of course, see Andermatt which lay at the other end of the long winding pass. A tunnel bored through the granite would have penetrated through to the railway sidings after less than three miles, and a short distance beyond them was Andermatt itself.

The Rabbi expressed what this implied in his own way. "It seems," he said, "a long way from anywhere real, here in Stradt . . . What is it you wanted to speak to me about? – was it Dr Moyen?"

"What made you ask that?"

He shrugged. "Moyen is a Jew. Or perhaps I should say he *was* a Jew. He never comes to the Synagogue now. But I used to know him fairly well. Now . . ." he pushed a lower lip hard outward. "Pah! Utterly different. Quite unrecognizable."

Theresa made a decision. She got up in her brisk, decisive way, then stood very still before him. "I had a dream, two weeks ago it was." The agitated rustle of her habit as she suddenly put her hand up to her brow. Then: "I dreamed it was dark, and I wanted to pray. So I went to the chapel. It was locked, so I turned the key and went in." She paused a while. Only the roar of the churning water in the distance filled in the gap. "There was a high wind and it had blown the candles out. I felt very frightened, but managed to get the window shut. At last I found a candle and lighted it, and held it up to the altar. And then . . ." She seemed to rock in a semi faint. The Rabbi put out a hand quickly to steady her. For he knew how this dream ended.

"You'd better sit down."

"No! I'm all right." He waited patiently till she went on: "In place of the Crucifix . . ." her eyes on him, huge and wide and penetrating, and also very strange, "there was an electric pylon."

During the ensuing silence, the Rabbi led her to the long seat at the back of the shelter.

Then, gently, he said: "You didn't dream it, Sister Theresa."

"It was a dream," she said. Her voice sounded automatic, mechanical, frightening.

The Rabbi thought of a child's intuition, and realized he would have to go very carefully. For he knew, from psychotherapeutic training, the dangers of the hot denial.

He knew roughly what to do, but what he didn't know was how far Theresa had gone. But if he could only get *her* to say that what she thought she had dreamed had actually happened . . .

He made her sit down. "Something like that happened to me also."

"Happened?"

"I'm not sure what word I should use. I'm not sure 'dream' is really the right word. It's so confusing, isn't it, when we are confronted by weird phenomena? Automatically we recoil from the possibility of something completely inexplicable occurring. It's so much better that we should dream it! We want to live in a sane world. Anything that conflicts with that sanity, we try and dismiss. I wish I was sure that my thing was just a dream. Mind you – there are people who have good reason to try and persuade me that it was!"

Theresa looked at him searchingly. "Surely, you must *know*?"

He was careful not to look back at her. "I'm not sure that I really do . . . I think that – sometimes – it's hard to tell the difference between fantasy and reality. For instance . . ." He flicked her a look . . . "You've met this man Verolde, haven't you? – George Verolde?"

"Yes."

"Take his life. What's he pursuing? Does he know? When can he relax? Don't you think, on every Sabbath Day, when he can't raise the stock exchange on the telephone, he is a frightened man? Where is his wife, his children, his happiness? Who does he love and who loves him? What is his sex, and how does he express it? And what goes on, Theresa, behind those baffling eyes? Such a man must live his fantasy, Sister, for there is nothing else. He buys his dreams with much money . . ." And he went for his point: "This nightmare you say you had – isn't that rather symbolic of the life *he* leads? It's the opposite of the life you lead, so you call it a dream."

She looked at him. "You're trying to tell me something."

"Hasn't it struck you that we both might be victims of the same thing? There's a word, Sister, that we occasionally hear . . . usually when we least expect it. I've seen it written, too: on the wall of a smashed-up telephone kiosk; I've seen it scrawled in the oily mass of a factory floor . . . after an industrial accident that seemed to have no cause." He mouthed it quietly. "Servex."

Theresa's eyes were tearful as she realized something about herself. In a whisper she said: "The creed of those who cannot serve God . . .! Where was my faith, Rabbi, that I should disbelieve an actual event that desecrated all that I value?"

Firmly, the Rabbi put his hand on her shoulder. "Hear me out! Don't you think I could look back on a similar event, and then doubt? There is not that much difference, except in shape, Sister, between the Crucifix and the Star of Zion."

"And so this . . . really happened?—to you, also?"

He nodded. "Just the same."

"But you weren't deluded! You knew!"

"Because I locked the model pylon away. I can show it to you, if you like."

Theresa shook her head helplessly. "I cannot be forgiven this.

A few minutes ago I was making *judgements*, Rabbi! – upon people who had far more excuse than I for losing their way! Yet how am I fit to help them, if I doubt the very God I claim to worship?"

"I'll have none of that! I'm not going to stand here while you torture yourself. You know damn well we are none of us invulnerable. And *they*," he barked, "know *that*! So they do something – and God alone knows what they do – probably while you are sleeping, probably with a device I've heard about but never seen, to try and break your faith."

Theresa said tonelessly: "It should be impossible."

"Yes, yes, yes! In a perfect world it *is* impossible! But, don't you see? – there was just a possibility that you might have told your Holy Mother, and she *might* have told those who could have carried it through, right back to Rome?"

"They had to stop me, then."

"Yes."

"And if I hadn't met you in the street —"

"– but you did!"

"I might have ended up like —"

"– but you haven't!" The Rabbi watched some people drifting towards the shelter. Beyond them, an eight-wheeler bus approaching the shelter. "Still, I'll say this. If a tiny fraction of their skills can work on you, Sister, it's a far more dangerous evil than those who skate on the thin ice of a few 'Thou Shalt Nots'!"

They met each other's eyes for a moment. Both knew this was strictly man to woman, and never mind God.

The bus filled and went while Ralstein and Theresa strolled back towards the car park. They never reached it though . . .

"Sister! Do you see what I see?"

She did. "Yes. The chair-lift is working!"

"It wasn't before. Rather an odd time to start it, isn't it?"

Theresa's gleeful look had returned. "Let's take a closer look!"

"Where from?"

"The top!"

He said: "Except we might get stuck halfway if they decide to stop it again."

"Take a chance!"

He grinned beneath the tall black "couple" and jumped on a chair. Theresa took the next one along.

It was an odd ride altogether. A ghostly moon, apparently moving also, as if strung on a cable wire in the sky, played on the grotesque molluscs of the clinic – fairyland and the witch's castle. Near by, as if possessively on guard, pylons threw their shadows – waiting.

Ahead, the erect figure of the Rabbi, whose chair bounced comically up and down as the squeaking wheels clinked and clicked and the tight hauser hummed with the wind. He sat bolt upright, his hands graced, serene.

The clinic wheeled slowly around as perspective changed it, till the hotel loomed over the final rise and presented its garish front, finger pointing out across the valley. The spectacle did not evoke the same sort of cynical reaction Theresa had felt down by the rink. She loved people – prudes and scoundrels alike – and felt a warm gratitude towards the Rabbi for seeing in her the beginnings of hatefulness . . .

And they alighted, two romping figures in the moonlight, playing truant with the snow. Above them, looking like just another piece of fairyland, was the great white dam.

But Ralstein wasn't looking at that. For near the top ripek of the chair-lift was a small hut, and the Rabbi found himself inexorably attracted to it.

Theresa said: "That'd be trespassing."

"We already are."

"But why —?"

"Just an idea I had. Come on!" And he squeaked the door open. Theresa squeezed in behind him. "And the Holy Mother better not find me here!"

The Rabbi was surveying the control gear on the panel. Then he nodded, as if he'd found what he expected. Absently he replied: "If your Holy Mother saw us now she'd skedaddle as fast as possible in the opposite direction and resolve to take more water with it in the refectory – but I think I've found something: look! You see this switch?"

"Whatever it does, it's in the 'off' position anyway."

"It controls the motors which drive the chair-lift – You see? It's marked."

"But if it's switched off, why are they running?"

"Because the other position must mean automatic."

"Even though it doesn't say so?"

He thought a bit. "We can probably work it out. What made it start in the first place?"

She tapped the tall hat. "You obviously have an idea inside there. What *did* make it start?"

"Us."

"Whatever do you mean, Rabbi Ralstein?"

"It's not difficult. Look, the traffic lights change when your car passes over the trip."

"That sounds very technical."

"That's nothing. You should see the train set we have at the Youth Centre. Automatic signals everywhere."

"You designed it?"

"Yes."

"But if you're right, the thing should know that we've reached the top. Shouldn't it? Why is it still moving?"

"I was wondering the same thing. Unless it's gone wrong. And anyway, what's the point of it? It must be far cheaper, just to switch on in the morning and off at night. Unless —"

Theresa said impatiently: "Oh, do get on with it, Rabbi! It's too cold in here to think!"

The Rabbi took no notice of this at all. "A few minutes ago, that little girl – what's her name?"

Theresa looked very guilty. "I know . . . I should have talked to her. But I was . . ."

The Rabbi raised an elegant hand. "Just tell me her name."

"Lizbet Staffen."

"Her father . . . isn't he the guide, up at the dam?"

"Is he? I didn't realize."

"You don't know him?"

"I've met him. Go on."

"I think we should talk to him."

"About Lizbet?"

"Partly . . . Look, I'll tell you what's on my mind. Lizbet was told today that she was banned from seeing you at the Clinic."

"*Banned?*"

"Yes . . . I know you're upset but that's not the point. Something made you suddenly want to ride up on these chairs. Do you know what?"

"I'm afraid it was simply because I thought it would be fun," – pouting at him.

"Did you? – and yet it was just after our rather serious little talk in the bus shelter."

"Are you accusing me of divine inspiration?"

He said flatly: "You saw something odd happening and you sensed it might be important."

"But what's your point?"

"I think these people can't *help* making things automatic . . . even if they can be worked just as well some other way."

Theresa said brightly: "Oh, I've always thought that anyway!"

"Pity. I thought I was being profound . . . What about the powerhouse? Has Lizbet told you how that's worked . . .? I mean, she's probably been down there if her father's on the staff?"

"Lizbet never mentions it. But I went on a conducted tour, only a few days ago."

"Well . . . I won't ask why, this time!"

And Theresa looked very thoughtful. "I was with Dr Moyen . . . The guide told me, in answer to my question, that the dam was controlled by a computer some distance away."

"Did he say where?"

"He said he didn't know. Moreover, Dr Moyen nearly interrupted while I was asking these questions. He seemed anxious."

"That could explain why Lizbet is no longer allowed to see you."

"Yes. Where's all this leading, Rabbi?"

"Pneumonia, I should think . . . We're both frozen. But I'm afraid I haven't finished up here. You'd better go back."

"I'm blowed if I'm going back!"

"All right, then. We're going up to the dam. It's quite a climb on foot."

"I have a foot. Two, in fact . . ."

On the way up:

"You will observe, Sister Theresa, that the chair-lift is still running."

"I do."

"I only play with model railways. But I think I'd be quite worried if I could automatically *start* the trains, and not *stop* them."

She stopped a moment, panting. "So would I."

"Keep climbing."

"You keep thinking."

"I intend to."

On reaching it:

Theresa: "What a desolate place this is at night."

"Yes."

Cracked ice on the surface of the water below them creaked and groaned against the dam wall. And this was the only sound, for the wind had dropped to nothing.

The place was so vast and so isolated that it didn't seem to have anything to do with anything else; so that the faint roaring of the ejected water, far below in the valley, had no link – acceptable to human emotions – with the secretive silence that only the broken ice disturbed.

Unconsciously, the Rabbi lowered his voice. "Did you see the papers today?"

Theresa was staring down into the water, trying to solve a nagging puzzle. She stared up at him: "No. What was in them?"

"Quite an interesting item, Sister . . . Something about an air booking system in America . . . You know, they have computers to assess how many seats are available according to the likely number of passengers for the time of year and so forth. From this they can tell whether or not to run extra flights."

"I know the sort of thing."

"Apparently, the system got mixed up. I don't pretend to understand it – and I'm convinced the reporter didn't, either! – but it was something to do with the air bookings becoming confused with road traffic control on a freeway outside Chicago. The wires had got crossed up, or something, and not only did the traffic lights go haywire but twenty aircraft took off empty that day."

"And just what," asked Theresa, smiling, "has that to do with a chair-lift running, all on its own, when nobody wants it?"

"I don't know. It was just being down in that hut – it made me think of it. Automatic chair-lifts that start and won't stop . . ."

"How about dams that fill up with water, and won't empty?"

The Rabbi looked at her sharply, then down at the water.

Theresa: "I knew it. But I couldn't put my finger on it. The level is far too high."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive!"

The Rabbi turned, then peered down over the other side into the valley.

He saw the rooftop of the hotel, directly below. He saw the dim lights of the Clinic, a little further than that. He saw the multivarious coloured lights of Stradt, its illuminated bedroom windows, its street lighting.

And he thought of the school, whose playground nudged the ice rink at the very point where the bottom extreme of the chair-lift extended.

And he said: "An accident . . . an accident like that: it would seem to me almost deliberate. Do you know what I mean?"

She nodded. "I think I do."

"You know – like the suicidal psychotic, who wants to take others with him?"

Theresa shuddered. "Let's get to the control room. There should be someone on duty." A slab of ice crunched itself to pieces.

The Rabbi seemed to be expressing their mutual thoughts as he said: "Supposing there isn't?"

Dr Norman Williams kicked the medicine trolley into the middle of the treatment room and Ham and Peter collected the chairs.

Stranger, looking grim, was still on the phone. Near him was the box of tricks that had been ejected from the car when Stan hit the power line.

In an undertone, Williams asked Peter: "You're quite certain there are no mikes in this section?"

"I've checked and double-checked. The nearest one is in the hotel foyer."

Williams gestured towards it. "Let's be quite sure. Is the door beyond this one shut?"

"They're both shut."

"Good."

Stranger hung up, sat down by the trolley, which comprised the conference table. "That was Dr Irene Pellings," he said.

Williams' sharp, birdlike movement of the head registered cursory assessment. He realized there was more trouble, saw the

suddenly fatigued drooping of the tell-tale moustache – litmus to all moods. Stranger was looking older, tireder; and in that moment Williams felt a pang of doubt. For if Stranger seemed to show a measure of incipient defeat, it could only be for good reason. Stranger continued: "A petition, from her language students, has been submitted, demanding her removal."

"On what grounds?"

"Does it matter? – you can do it at the pressing of a switchkey; and those students are sitting ducks every time they enter the language laboratory."

Peter recalled his own bitter experience and murmured: "The way things are run."

"Yes, sir . . . and very efficient it is, too. The University are being quite sensible about it – sending her on leave to another college for a month. But the same thing will happen there."

Ham: "They'll run her out of business? Why?"

"Because she wiped those rigged teaching tapes; and because of a television broadcast she did, not long ago."

Williams asked Stranger if he'd seen it.

"Yes, sir." He looked down at the box of tricks. He seldom showed any overt hate. He did now. "I remember how she ended the broadcast – her exact words, in fact. She said: 'Many people fear computers, because they seem to impersonate human beings. But they are wrong. What they should fear is the opposite: human beings who impersonate computers.' It fits, of course."

Williams nodded, looked at his watch. "Well, it's late . . . and I do want to raise this plan of Peter's. But we'll go round the table. Stranger has been doing some theoretical work and this would seem to relate to Pellings' suspension at the University. Richard . . .?"

Stranger squinted worriedly through tobacco smoke and spoke fast. "If Irene is right she's inadvertently provided the Text. Unfortunately, I don't have a worthy sermon. But for openers, here's a question: Has anybody thought what Christina is for . . .? Peter, what do you think she's for?"

"Must I reduce her to that level?"

Williams said impatiently: "Come on, this is too vital a moment for sentiment."

Peter picked up a pair of forceps and tapped them slowly on

the trolley-top. Ham gazed down at the castors, as if they bore relevance to the matter in hand. The trolley wouldn't keep still; it was interesting to compute which way it would creep, according to who was leaning on it hardest. Ham thought, probably Peter was at that moment. "From the start," said Peter, "it was evidently vital for Servex to separate Christina from me. Ever since that test, way back in the States, they knew I was alien to them. No doubt they've kept track of me ever since – in fact, it's even possible that when John Forbes formed the company with me it was a deliberate move to maintain a close watch."

Ham said: "I go along with that assessment, but why did they need her so urgently?"

"Frankly I can't explain it. Perhaps someone else has an idea which might."

At such moments as these it was always to Stranger they looked. He never knew whether it was mathematics or sheer intuition that enabled him so often to rise to an occasion. But now, with the iron lung monotonously lifelining a patient in the cubicle with deep, measured phrases of breath, Stranger squinted beneath contorted brows at each pair of eyes in turn, then snapped: "Sirs. I think I know the answers – and you, Peter, won't like them. Sorry."

"Try me."

"You sure you want to hear it?"

"*John . . .? We're not picking up a thing . . . That's right; they must be in the hospital section. No mikes in there.*"

"You sure you want to hear it?"

Peter grinned. "That means you don't think we're going to believe you!"

Stranger didn't smile, concentrated utterly. "We have to think of a rapidly expanding computer system. We have to bear in mind the extent of the operations those computers are expected to carry out. Look at them! Factories all over the world; power dams and traffic control and air booking and nuclear power stations – and these are just the ones we actually know about. What about the ones we don't? – all the military and political and economic systems that we have every reason to believe are part of the vast Servex network . . . and the way they link people, or get rid of people – like the passengers on the airliner, like the victims

of the Trek, like Irene Pellings at the University. How do they build machines fast enough?"

Ham nodded. "I think I see where this is leading."

"*Fellowes! Get weaving and dial up an Asking Channel to find out what's going on with the dinosaurs.*"

"*Rawlins says we need authority for that.*"

"*Then buzz him, you fool.*"

"Where I think it's leading, Ham, is to people like Christina."

Ham said impatiently: "How the hell can computers use her brain . . .? That's what you're suggesting, isn't it? – that having run out of computer capacity they're incorporating people-thinkers?" He grinned.. "People-thinkers don't think very fast. Me, for instance!"

Stranger flicked ash like a maestro cueing an unresponsive section of the orchestra. "My dear Ham, 'people-thinkers' are part of every computer there is, in any case. If I do one operation on one machine, then cross the room and feed the result to another machine, I am a link between the two. My thought is: 'Take output from machine number one, and if appropriate, feed this to the input of machine number two' – an operation which requires human judgement."

Williams said tersely: "Ham is right. 'People-thinkers' – and don't blame me for that phrase! – can't act fast enough compared with the speed of the machinery. In the time it takes them to cross a room they have already become redundant."

Stranger wasn't thrown. "Exactly. But there's a way around that. You get the machines accustomed to whichever people-thinker you're using, and then you do something which provides you with all the human judgement, but working at a speed comparable with the rest of the machinery."

Peter looked startled. "What do you mean, 'the rest of the machinery' —?"

Stranger chucked it straight at him. "You make a copy, of course!"

"A copy?" Peter half-rose from his chair. "You're not talking about Christina?"

"Listen, a minute . . .! I told you you weren't going to like it. But ask yourself why they need Christina so much! Couldn't it be because once they do all the intricate programming to get the

computers adjusted to her particular personality-group, they can't just switch to someone else? Couldn't it be also that they can't have you interfering with her emotionally, simply because they know your personality-group is totally wrong for the machinery?"

"But! . . . Look, I know I'm just gaping like an idiot, Richard; but how do you copy a human being? Have little tin ladies running around with clockwork motors?"

Stranger stared straight out of the window – no expression. "You build a simulator. That's right: you get hold of a volunteer who happens to have the right sort of basic brain . . . Then you put this brain under a microscope. To find a suitable brain, you have some sort of place for screening the candidates —"

Ham suddenly snapped his fingers. "– Musiconics!"

Stranger took the point quietly. "Probably . . . Then, as I say, you get this brain and you map it out and profile it and process it, and you do likewise to the machines so that they have the maximum facility for communication. Those candidates who won't do . . . Well, we saw what happened to Stan." He turned to Peter. "Of course, you are a terrible nuisance to them. You love the prototype."

Peter yelled: "Prototype . . .! For Christ's sake, she's a human being!"

Ham, because he just could not face the issue, preferred to play mildly amused. Taking his glasses off to polish the lenses he said: "You're having us on! A prototype? What for? A production model?" He added: "Can I have one too, please?"

It was Dr Williams who seemed to get the point – and Fat Mrs Jemison would have hated him with all her bulging indignation at that moment. He went flushed in the face and crashed a fist on the trolley so the instruments hopped an inch. "No! He's right. But he doesn't mean it in the literal sense. Look here, think of what Dr Pellings said! She said what we ought to fear are 'human beings who impersonate computers' . . . in other words, that aspect of a human brain which is usable 'as' a computer. But you can't just plug in, like they do in the funnies." Another percussive crash on the trolley. "So why not make a copy? – if it works faster yet thinks the same way, they've got human judgement built into the machine!"

Ham just went right on with polishing the glasses. "Impossible.

It would need to be about the size of the United Nations building."

"No. Modern solid-state circuitry is compact. Soon we'll be growing clumps of transistors in the garden."

Ham remained unmoved. "All right. Even supposing you could build such a monster . . . .How could you program it?"

This time, Stranger took over. "With Christina herself. How else?"

Ham did look up this time. "But that would imply mood: love, hate, fear, joy, not to mention retaliation."

"Sir! Are you suggesting Servex doesn't retaliate?"

"Fellowes? Look at this reading! It thinks the Freid must have found the mikes!"

"Yes. But It can't seem to make up Its mind."

"I know. We've simply got to get further with Christina's C.A.V. Is she ready – for the programming?"

"Rawlins told me this morning she needs another day's orientation."

"Bugger Rawlins!"

Williams to Stranger: "Do you think they used" – he indicated the box of tricks – "one of those things? I mean on her?"

Stranger handed it across. Williams plonked it on the trolley.

"These," said Williams, "hundreds of them – maybe even thousands – are being used on perfectly ordinary human beings who are becoming less ordinary every second as a result. We know roughly what they do. But we don't know where they're produced, or how they're distributed. Nor do we know who's using them. We've got to find out. Peter has a plan which may help us do just that."

Peter said: "We've got to find one of the Servex control depôts. That's the only way of discovering how they operate."

Ham: "Can't we just trace the wires? I mean from the mikes they're using to bug us with?"

"No. They're using the power lines for that too. There's no way of tracing where the hell they lead. We've got to get Servex to react to something, so that something shows on the surface."

"Using those mikes?"

Williams said: "Precisely, Ham. And I want you to tell us the work you did on those reactions. For the game we're going to play is called 'Cat and Mouse'."

Ham nodded. "I get it . . . Well, I don't know who's Tom and who's Jerry; but I did just happen to do some work back in California, with a professor who had views on 'the Electronic Revolution' . . ." For a moment he seemed embarrassed at such pretensions to intellect. "Actually, I'm just a poor millionaire who inherited Big Daddy's airline. Weird things – if you can believe the papers – are happening to that airline; and even weirder things are happening to Daddy's millions – if you've read today's shares index . . . and that's excluding the alimony I pay out."

Politely, Williams interpolated: "Ham, do you think we could dispense with the slow jokes? I know you have useful things to say and you don't have to apologize . . . What was this 'biological' theme you were elaborating on a few weeks ago, when you were too absorbed to remember to make fun of yourself?"

"Oh, that." Ham shifted in his chair, taking five seconds in which to erase the dry self-denigration. "Okay, I think it goes like this: You have to think of Servex as an organism . . . a somewhat primitive organism whose nervous system has no brain centre."

Stranger gestured extravagantly. "Primitive!" he cried. "That should please John Forbes no end."

"I meant," said Ham coldly, "the composite organism is primitive in the way it reacts."

Williams frowned. He never joked in conference . . . and anyway the trolley kept shifting infuriatingly and was difficult to write on. So he heaved the Communications Unit on to the floor, which at least gave more space. "Continue."

"Okay . . . the organism has certain lines of defence. For instance, it camouflages itself like the chameleon."

"Big business," said Peter.

"Sure. But there is also a more subtle disguise altogether. A back-to-front kind of a disguise. You see, by very virtue of calling itself something – the name Servex – it manages to convey the impression that it exists apart."

"Whereas," said Stranger, "it is really a part of Society."

"Yes . . . a very big part. And unquestionably it intends to become the whole of Society. In other words, it represents a trend which is happening to Society itself. So we are not talking

about a separate entity, but – in the final analysis – the whole of civilization. It's just that at this stage the thing hasn't caught on quite so well as, say, the mini-skirt." Ham pushed his glasses up over his brow, as if temporarily to erase this latter thought.

"Now, this organism . . . Like many things in Society, it doesn't actually represent the interests of any one human being – in fact, it is in direct conflict with the interests of the individual. It is an imposed rule of thumb resulting from everyone knowing what everyone else is doing almost before they do it, and arises from the tightness of modern communications, which never allow anything to develop before everyone else is asked what they think. So . . : the organism has no sense of direction. The tail wags the dog, as with tee-vee ratings that come in too fast for the programme to establish itself.

"Then something stung it. We don't know what. But what happens when one animal is stung by another? Think of the squid. The squid sends a thick black oily substance into the water . . . In other words, it hits back."

Ham, with his lethargic manner, didn't reveal the tension he felt beneath. But the trolley did. Somehow, Ham had got a pressure, one foot against the other, which involved a castor of the trolley. His foot slipped, and the trolley shot across the room, crashing finally against the drugs cupboard with a clatter of tin and shattering glass. Kidney basins and instruments alike shot into the air, then clattered on the floor, like the uproar of an accident staged in a comic radio show.

"*Forbes? You down there?*"

"*What is it, Rawlins?*"

"*We have a prediction. It's not very clearcut, about eighty per cent reliable . . .*"

"*Yes . . .?*"

"*You wanted to know whether they've found the mikes. The answer is that if they test us out, with some kind of plan of action – which they would discuss deliberately within range of a microphone – and if they do this within the next two hours, then they're on to us . . . probably.*"

"*What's that based on?*"

"*Mostly their change of behaviour pattern. Their object, by the way, will be to get a reaction from you.*"

"*You mean they want a meeting or something?*"

"That is what it would mean, yes."

"Why all this uncertainty?"

"I don't know. But ever since the rainstorm the computers have detected some sort of bluff. It's causing a considerable overload and the degree of paradox is giving us a lot of trouble."

"But even if the Freid do this we'll still be only eighty per cent sure. That leaves twenty per cent doubt, doesn't it?"

"That's the best figure we can get and we're stuck with it."

"Well, Rawlins . . . if they are trying to rig a meeting it suits us."

"John . . . the computers don't like this game of Cat and Mouse."

"No matter! If the Freid want a meeting we could work on whoever they send. Get this man Peter Shackleton down here and wire him to a Communications Unit. Then send him back. In that way we could neutralize the Freid. Couldn't we?"

Williams picked up the surgical instruments and plopped them into the sterilizer. "Ham, did you do that on purpose?"

"You know darn well I didn't."

"Interesting. Unconsciously you express tension by applying certain forces to the trolley. The forces become unstable and the trolley goes out of control. There's evidence in the papers that this is what Servex is doing to its own internal electronics. If we pile on the tension this will accelerate."

"Yeah, but won't that be dangerous? Servex has a gigantic share of industry under its control. Won't we be making things worse if we deliberately set out to drive it crazy?"

"What's the alternative?" Wirily, Williams leaned on the windowsill, penetrating darkness with screwed-up eyes towards the hub of industrial Exeter. "All we'd be doing is to force people to bring their machinery under human control – and then leave it like that until they knew exactly what is causing what."

"It's a hell of a lot of responsibility to take on, and you could do an awful lot of damage if you miscalculated."

"So what do you do, Ham? Let it get worse and worse? We have to take a calculated risk. Leave it too late, and it would be like trying to hit the panic button long after the button could stop the machine. Think: once a natural process, like the flowing of a river, starts to push the machine which is supposed to be controlling the water-level, it doesn't matter what you do with that button: the disaster is assured."

"Hell, are you saying people have been sitting on their backsides ignoring red lights?"

"No. I'm saying they don't act on what they see happening to the river: if the little red light doesn't come on they remain hypnotized. They just sit there, drowning. In blind faith they believe the machine, they believe it is 'fail safe' because it has become their religion. There's only one way we can put a stop to that —"

"– and stop them we must!" said Stranger. "Force them back into using human control before there's no going back at all! What are you waiting for, Ham? Do you want the human race to be driven permanently out of its mind, by seeing the machines mimicking human behaviour? — Some think that's happening even now! Or do we wait for an automated nuclear war, dreamed up by machinery that's equally demented?"

A silence . . . till Ham, visibly affected, turned to Peter. "So what do we do?"

"What we do is to test them out: stage a 'radio play' within range of these microphones and pretend we're going to cut their trunk nerve!"

Stranger produced a blissful smile. "You mean, the Porthcurno cable . . .? What an exquisite idea!"

Chapter Fifteen

"RAWLINS on squawkbox, John."

"Okay, I'll take it." Forbes glanced up at the clock over the display screens, then swung into the seat behind the informator console. "You go and check the van. You know what we need so have it ready. Book an air ferry through the Action Channel and make bloody sure the van will fit into the aircraft."

Fellowes hesitated. "The schedule is tight. What time is your take-off?"

"Not yet computed."

"But you might not get there in time to —"

"– Oh, for God's sake get on with it!"

Forbes, left alone in the control room, flicked the intercom key and selected Servex Local.

"Rawlins here."

"Rawlins . . . Why all this gear for Porthcurno? – I'm going there myself and I'm quite capable of dealing with Peter Shackleton."

Rawlins' dry, dour voice came back: "Maybe, but this isn't a personal vendetta between you and Shackleton. The Servex decision is that a tee-vee camera is to be trained on Shackleton and only in this way can we be sure that he intends actually cutting the cable."

"I honestly don't see that it matters, one way or the other. If he shows up I bring him back here, and that's it."

"That isn't 'it', Forbes. As far as we are concerned the major issue is to discover whether or not they know about the mikes. If he's bluffing, they probably do; if he's not bluffing, they probably don't."

"It's a detail."

"It's not. We've got to clear this confusion – it's taking far too much computer-capacity and we can't afford it."

"All right . . . Why don't we just let him have his head, see whether he actually does cut the cable?"

"Because," said Rawlins, in the manner of one talking to a maddening infant, "that cable is already working to capacity and we can't afford to lose it for the time it would take to repair. I wish you'd just accept that we know what we're doing. That way we could save our breath – let alone a lot of computer-time."

"All right, all right. Don't get huffy! Who's installing the camera?"

"That," said Rawlins, tight-lipped, "will be arranged for you. All you have to do is to watch him on your pocket-monitor and make sure he doesn't actually take a swipe at the wire. The tee-vee picture will, of course, be relayed here and analysed as to his actual intention."

"I fail to see how you can tell what he means to do, if you don't actually let him do it. How can you analyse something that doesn't happen?"

Rawlins nagged: "Could you tell any better? – just by watching him?"

"Not if I've got to stop him doing it."

"Exactly!"

Forbes was just about to say something when he got an indicator-light for Mike No. 1 – the microphone installed in Williams' office down at Exeter. Simultaneously a tape recorder started up on the rack. Forbes turned up the volume on the monitor speaker. "Hang on, Rawlins . . . Someone's in Williams' office . . ."

. . . The sound seemed to be that of a girl crying . . . Then Williams' voice: "Nurse, what are you doing in here? It's late. Hadn't you better be getting to bed?"

"Is it true? – that you're going to send me away?"

"We think all this is too much of a strain on you. You were nearly attacked physically by Mr Friend tonight and I feel very badly about it . . ."

And *flop*! – another paradox light came up on Forbes' indicator panel. Forbes frowned, then called Rawlins again. "I've got another light."

Rawlins' voice, even when distorted by the intercom, sounded a little tense. "Yes, I know . . . Now why *is* that . . .? Wait a minute."

Forbes didn't wait, but said: "Why is she emotional?"

"I said, wait . . . I'm just getting a display here."

"Well, kindly switch it through to my teleprinter."

And the machine clacked into action:

QUERY EMOTIONAL REACTION NURSE ESSENTIAL POSITIVE INFM REGARDING FREID PROGRESS WHY RPT WHY NURSE NOT USING COMMUNICATIONS UNIT WHEN NEEDED

Forbes thought a second, then tapped out on the console machine:

SVX LCL FROM FORBES: DO THEY OR DO THEY NOT KNOW MIKES INSTALLED

There was quite a long pause before the answer came back:

SVX LCL TO FORBES: ESTIMATE LIKELIHOOD DISCOVERY OF MIKES NOW AT HJKY**PQQQQQ . . . CORRECTION ESTIMATE LIKELIHOOD DISCBBBLMMM CONTACT NUCLEAR SITE US INSTALLATION BASE O-FORTY AMBER ALERT RPT AMBER ALERT HJKY**PQQQQQ ******** CANCEL THIS TRANSMISSION FAULT REPORT 911 INTERFERENCE DEFENCE CIRCUIT PENTAGON STANDBY . . .

Forbes just sat and stared at it. Then:

TFK TO CMC: TOP-SECRET/MOST IMMEDIATE . . . INVESTIGATE SOURCE OF INTERFERENCE RE CONTROL CIRCUIT BASE O-FORTY TREAT MAXIMUM URGENCY CALL WHITEHOUSE HOTLINE AND REPORT

Rawlins snapped on the squawkbox: "Okay, Forbes. This is our problem. Call us when you reach Porthcurno."

All the way to Cornwall Peter had braced himself against the emotional desolation that awaited him in Porthcurno: and yet, when he swung down the lane at dawn, past the puritan white of the *Cable & Wireless* buildings, the full impact of sickening loneliness sent his body weak and produced a lump in his throat almost too humdrum for the situation which produced it.

He parked the car, then retrieved some suitably vicious-looking tools from the rear seat and chucked them on to the macadam. The clatter resounded through moist morning air, then echoed back from the buildings on either side. Few cars shared the tarmac with his. A forlorn GPO van; a battered station-wagon which – prosaically – Peter happened to remember from that other time; a maintenance truck belonging to some radio shop . . . these were the only vehicles left out in the weather.

Peter walked down to the shore.

Here, to the right, rising up from the vee-form of the beach, was the pathway along which Christina had initially led him. He observed it from the standpoint of the rusting tin of the diamond-shaped sign . . . *Telegraph Cables* . . .

"*It's quite simple really. It's got it written on the front.*"

The brisk coastal wind plucked at the loose bolts that held the diamond to the metal post. The resulting clatter was the stark voice of despair. Below, sea slapped pebbles and drew them, rattling, out towards the receding tide. It was a rough, surfing commotion of salt and spray. Out of sight where the second, forbidden bay awaited him, thudding rollers impacted against granite where the inlet was unsheltered to the Atlantic.

Now, he started up the steep slope that had come second on their list that other morning. He dreaded reaching the place where the exposed cable was. It was a nook in the landscape for memories.

Gulls circled as Peter heaved all that gear up the gradient . . . Big rocks on the high cliff and a petulant coastal wind tearing at the other diamond.

"*I've got to count sixty paces. That brings us to one of those gaps in the rocks. We have to hit the right gap. You'll see why soon . . .*"

The salt sting in Peter's eyes did not now come from the sea. Nor was Peter ashamed of this sudden burst of sobbing, a long cry that heaved itself from inner depths and defied all pretensions of control and discretion. He ran/slid/ran along the narrow path cut in the crumbling side of the cliff, careless of the dangers.

And by the gulley he stood, with his lament tearing at his muscles so that they ached. The ache relented slightly as he focused on a ship, slowly traversing the far horizon.

There was waiting to be done . . . and Williams, thought Peter, was not exactly original in stating that this was the truly difficult part . . .

So you wait, and you feel they are watching you – so that the flesh contracts and the stubble on it rises, as if the caress of danger could be met fractionally that much earlier by the extent of each short hair.

Watched . . . by whom? – by what . . .? Supposing you did

really slash at that cable? – slicing the spinal nerve and paralysing all beyond it? How could Servex afford to entertain even that remotest possibility? . . . No; they must know your every reflexive move . . . they must have sensitized this gusty shoreline, even to the extension of the tingling hairs on your forearm.

How? Where? Cameras?

Well, there's that tee-vee van, down in the car park. What else could it be doing there? The wizards of *Cable & Wireless* would surely do their own radio repairs? It can't be for their benefit . . . must be for mine.

Cat and Mouse . . . me watching you watching me.

I have only to raise the axe in preparation and . . .

I can't wait much longer . . . I'll have to commit myself soon.

What a fatuous performance! – and what a farce if, after all, no one shows up . . . if, after all, this old bit of cable is a dud from long ago, leading nowhere, except to sheer ridicule . . .

I'll just wait until that ship out there disappears behind the prick of Land's End . . .

What will they do when they find me here? These people use cameras, not artillery. They haven't the guts to open fire . . . haven't the nerve to shoot down an airliner. Instead, they indoctrinate some family-minded captain – and to hell with his wife and kids . . . So what's *my* brain in for? – a pair of electrical contacts?

I'm freezing to death and the ship's round the point so I'll take this damned axe and —

As if by magic – or at least by means of the thumbnail monitor in his hand – John Forbes was suddenly there on the path. He seemed his former, friendly self. Thick, over-long hair flipping untidily in the high breeze, he noted the axe with a grin and said: "Please don't do that, Peter."

Peter lowered the axe, waited.

Forbes gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder. "Why fight it, Peter? Why align with dinosaurs like Stranger? They can't win, you know. I happen to be absolutely certain of that . . ." He shouldered Peter and steered the way back down the path. "Yesterday's individual is merely today's eccentric. No influence, you see. That's what is different. There's the rub! It's

all so inevitable, you see, Peter. I could have told you – I *tried* to tell you. Now I'm going to prove it. That is, if you'll let me maintain a degree of secrecy. Will you?"

"I don't know what that entails."

"I'll explain. The only way – and I'm convinced it's *the only way*! – of persuading you to shed all that anachronistic armour of yours (you remember we talked about that?) is to show you, not what you're *up against*, Peter, but what you're *missing*. It's the difference between negative and positive . . . Do you mind leaving your car here in Porthcurno?"

"No."

"Good. I'm afraid I have to do something slightly melodramatic . . . I mean that's the way you'll see it. It's not the way I intend it." They had reached the top cable marker. Forbes flipped the diamond with his fingernails. "Then you won't really want to cut up our cables, I promise you. Were you really going to do it? I suppose you were!" He led on down. "The point is, I can't afford to let you find out where we're going – industrial secrets are industrial secrets. But I *can* afford to show you some of the facilities at our disposal. You can then go and tell your charmingly misguided friends down at the Freid. Hell, *someone's* got to tell them! We can't have nice people making asses of themselves forever . . ." He pointed to the tee-vee van. "A 'closed vehicle' – as I believe such jalopies are officially referred to by the police. But this one is fitted out rather nicely. I can even boil you an egg for your breakfast. Or we could open a whisky bottle, if you prefer that. You can wash and clean up and sit dozing in a very comfortable armchair. What you can't do is to look out. The doors will be locked from the outside and there are no windows. Do you mind that? Do you trust me?"

"Naturally. You people don't commit crimes."

Forbes smiled, repeating the phrase satirically. "*You people* –! What a moral judgement *that* sounds! Never mind. This is the truck. My driver will now lock us in. We have our own loo so don't panic."

The truck moved off from Porthcurno. Peter felt no excitement – just exhaustion.

"What you need," said Forbes helpfully, "is some sleep. But perhaps, in company with me, you wouldn't care to risk it . . .?

You fear machines as you fear big money, Peter, but even doctors prescribe sleeping pills and we have a long way to go."

"What has my fear of machines got to do with sleeping pills?"

Forbes started to get something out of a locker. "I was attempting — " he strained to reach his arm far enough down . . . "– I was attempting to break, somewhat gently, the concept of offering the use of my sleep inducer." He grinned. "I thought that if I planted the notion that pills, in fact, are machines which manipulate the brain chemistry, I might – albeit gingerly – move from there to the idea of something more recognizably mechanical without shocking you too much . . . bearing in mind, you see, your primitive superstitions."

The truck jerked to a halt and there was shouting outside. Forbes paused in the act of getting the equipment out of the locker, watching Peter with sardonic amusement. The truck started convulsively up a steep incline and Forbes still watched him. "At least," said Forbes, when the truck had returned to the horizontal, "I can enlighten you about the next stage —"

But Peter had figured it. " – but you don't have to, John. We are boarding a freighter aircraft."

"Bright boy."

"Not really. Even dinosaurs have noses; and the smell of aviation spirit is coming through the air conditioning." An aero engine started up. Clanks and clangings from below as clamps were fixed to the wheels of the van. Then the whine of a starter as the second engine turned. It fired, and the juddering rhythm of propellers pulsed up through the tyres and the springs, sloshing Scotch around in the bottle on the cocktail cabinet.

Peter said drily: "Isn't the pilot supposed to check that things are secured, in here?"

"Don't worry. Jim trusts me." Forbes slid the bottle into a wall-mounted ring. "I'm afraid there are no seat belts and I agree it's strictly illegal to carry passengers in this way. But it's *so* comfortable in here."

The aircraft brakes were released and they started to taxi. Peter said: "So go on about the sleep inducer."

"I wanted to see how far your neurotic horror of electronic magic extends."

"Not that far." Sleep inducers were nothing new and Peter was

prepared to resume the game of Cat and Mouse if it led anywhere.

And it did. The apparatus Forbes produced was not a sleep machine at all . . . it was a unit identical with the one Stranger had been handed by the police at the accident site; identical, also, with the apparatus used by the nurse before she hit the button which fired a fuse inside.

Forbes' confidence in the mystique and secrecy of this was Peter's real break. It evidently hadn't occurred to anyone at Servex that the equipment might have been discovered.

And as the freighter took off, wallowing along an undulating runway, then heaving itself reluctantly into the morning air, Peter did a simple computation all his own.

It had struck him, when Forbes first announced his intention, that it would be unwise of the Servex people to admit an alien personality into premises which were clearly secret – unless rigorous steps could be taken to ensure the continued maintenance of security. Though it had occurred to Peter that they might have had it in mind to hold him prisoner there, he'd discarded this idea immediately because such a scheme would have been in conflict with all precedents. "*You people don't commit crimes*" was true – they never did. Murder – their version – is no crime.

So as the aircraft banked and the pilot set course for whatever mystery destination happened to be detailed on his flight plan, Peter deduced that the use of the Communication Unit could only be to limit either his movements within Servex or the amount of detail he remembered once he'd left there.

He watched John Forbes' poker face, and marvelled that anyone could have such blind faith in a machine. His plan naïvely ignored what any cheap detective would have considered: that the other side might be on to it. One facet of computerized behaviour seemed to be this very limited capacity for considering areas of possibility. It tallied, of course, with the correspondingly limited circuit-capacity of computers by comparison with the human brain.

Forbes removed the whisky bottle from its holding ring and topped up the glasses. During this, Peter did a sum: how to wear those headphones without succumbing to the hidden message?

And the answer? – to short-circuit the flex, leading from the little black box, in a way which would leave no trace.

The flex was ordinary fabric-covered lighting wire . . . the same sort that any table lamp sprouts from its base. Under the fabric would be a thickness of rubber insulation.

The thing to do would be to press something with a sharp edge across the two wires. This would make contact for as long as you held it there, while the thickness of the rubber would still maintain the insulation the moment you removed it. And the can opener would do very well, thank you.

Forbes, smiling through sadistic spectacles, asked: "Well?"

"Okay. Let's play with your toy, John."

Peter reached for his refurbished drink; and while Forbes glanced down in order to plug the black box into a point in the side of the van, Peter got hold of the can opener – one of those cheap metal ones – and kept it clenched in his fist.

All was ready. Peter put on the headphones; and it looked perfectly logical to pass the flex through a protective hand, to prevent the wire from fouling the whisky glass now on the chair arm.

Forbes, watching Peter closely, but – almost predictably – missing the one essential, smiled slightly and said: "Wanna go bye-byes?"

Peter's ensuing sleep was genuine, though not stimulated by any artificial means. Anxiety and misery over Christina had shortened many consecutive nights; and the tension resulting from resisting the urge to take drastic, dramatic measures which would have resolved nothing had been a continual strain.

Though he awoke momentarily on touchdown he was conscious of nothing further until John's sardonic, sneering lilt broke into his uneasy sleep. "Up we get!" said John.

The vehicle dipped downward and whined jerkily in bottom gear down a steep incline. For a moment Peter thought they were just quitting the carcass of the aircraft, till he realized that had already happened some time back.

So they must be entering Servex itself; and this alerted Peter the more sharply because he could only guess how he might be expected to respond. He chose, in fact, merely to obey obvious commands without resistance. At the same time he considered

this should be done without any change in his general attitude. It was an exacting course to pursue.

The establishment they were now in endured the structural embarrassment of being unfinished; so that whatever pretensions to modernity applied higher up in the building they had not penetrated this level. In this low-ceilinged area there was merely the stuffy smell of fresh concrete and the sound of air conditioning plant . . . and the receding footsteps of the truck driver clacking across the damp stone floor. Flush-fitting manhole covers in the floor suggested an even lower level further down.

Once through the bulkhead door, Peter found the layout of the place – this section at any rate – was practical and conformed closely with the design practices currently in vogue in modern office premises or at airports or factory buildings. At the same time many of the fittings were recognizably identical with those at the Clinic of the Snows.

As Forbes and he left the elevator at the second floor Peter found that despite his ruse to ensure immunity from the Unit there was something about the superb efficiency evident here which made you *want* to believe in it. The effect of the cool proficiency of calm technologists in trim white coats, tending excellently-designed equipment which receded, in orderly rows, all the way down the computer room, was hypnotically persuasive and gave you an acute attack of *if you can't fight 'em, join 'em.* The faint, clean smell, conveyed by the air conditioning ducts, of pleasantly disinfected air . . . the meticulous placing of glarefree lighting . . . the immaculate, eye-pleasing detail in choice of colour, integrated furnishings, scrupulously neutral carpeting . . . crisply polite rejoinders from contented workers – all these combined to obliterate a succession of memories of the seamier side and the tendency now was to conform immediately and find some excuse for each so as to beg the question of before.

Forbes dismissed the contents of this huge room with: "These are merely the conventional computers used everywhere in industry. Servex Interlock, however, is a lot more interesting." He paused distractedly to exchange a yes and a no or two with some technician on some routine point, then shovelled Peter with his arm and escorted him towards a pair of doors at the far end. The doors gave access to a small anteroom, luxuriously furnished.

Forbes said cheerfully: "The easiest way, I think, to put your mind at rest over a number of things is simply to put you through the routine visit we lay on for clients who are considering the adoption of Servex methods. This is the V.I.P. Room, where coffee will be brought you. I shall leave you on your own, because the entire process is automated – as an initial acclimatization to the way in which all the processes are carried out." He added, with a friendly smile: "Tycoons are invariably agog at this point – rather like children going through the ritual of the processed toy fair at a big department store . . . You know, you get one ride on the dodgems, one turn on the roundabout, one free gift from Father Christmas . . . and all the rest of it. Well, I suppose this business is rather like that; and anyway, Peter, you haven't been paying nearly enough attention to the ballyhoo of yuletide – there are only five days to go! – so why not catch up now?"

"Don't I get a guide?"

Forbes' glasses re-transmitted cynical amusement. "Not *exactly* . . . After all, if we had a chap spouting all this, every single time and to every single customer, we'd need a whole medical section devoted to the cure of the sore throat. Even you would admit, I think, that the tape recorder is here to stay. Okay?"

With that, Forbes left him alone. And into the oppressive little room floated, in elaborate Stereo, the dreary sound of a silky, tea-room orchestra. The choice of programme turned out to be a selection from '*How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*'.

At first, what followed did not savour so much of the Future – at least as the literary prophets would have it – as an elaboration on current business-recreation trends based generally on the theme of *Playboy* masturbation; and the displaced Bunny who brought the coffee set the mood. Though she sported no rabbit's ears, the pumped-up breasts preceded her into the room by the appropriate margin and the micro-miniskirt drew attention to an active little bottom in the manner of the quickie cartoon . . . three skilled strokes of the pen and that's that.

Naturally Peter, who was no prude with a built-in defence-mechanism against the patently unsubtle, responded predictably – though not with the delayed pending-tray of anticipated auto-eroticism to which the conventional tycoon is supposedly sentenced. He took one look at the television-announceress smile on the

Vaseline lips and rose to the occasion. "Who," he asked her, "switches off the lights?"

The smile did not waver. "You won't find any switches," she said. "They're worked automatically."

"You too?"

She dumped the coffee. "No. But I *am* trained to deal with clients who get too fresh."

"What's the technique? Do you press an alarm button of some tiny radio set, concealed even in that outfit? Or is the place bugged, so that a squad of armed robots can come bleep-bleeping to your rescue?"

"Why are you so offensive?"

"Because it's you who's cheapening you – not me."

"Then why finger the goods if you disapprove?"

"Because I'm happy to say that my responses are as predictable as whoever dressed you in that gear knew them to be. My point is that it's irrelevant . . . like illustrating a box of squodgy chocolates with a reproduction of the Mona Lisa. Why do you allow them to do it? They don't get a free replica of you, do they? – with each tin box of tricks they trundle into the office?"

"All the same," said the girl, trying to break clear, "most of the customers have decent manners. I think you'd be surprised."

"I doubt it. Their 'decent manners' are like a set of rules – they know how far they're allowed to go. And nothing scares a magnate quite like a flea in the ear from a *Playboy* rabbit . . . It's worse than telling a dirty joke in church." He kissed her energetically. "I'm not having my biology shoved in the deep freeze merely because of the latest regulation on the boardroom statute book, which directs that I must agree, by signing on the dotted line, that the female is fantasy and only exists in retrospect . . . Go away and marry someone; and when *he's* tired, *then* put on that garb and use it for a more noble reason."

She stared at him, smiling slightly, and said: "You know . . .? the funny part about it is that you are a terrible prude! Don't you know that there are heaps of perfectly normal tycoons who walk into nightclubs (I've worked in them and I should know!) who don't pinch our behinds and yet seduce their wives as regularly as clockwork? You've lost your sense of humour, somewhere along the line."

"Possibly. But with your built-in protection against having to think, I don't expect you to see that they're all compounding the same swindle – against you?"

"Oh, I do all right, Cockie!"

"For the moment. But even if they still direct their flagging energy towards their wives, aren't you a bit pathetic, allowing yourself to be the *hors d'œuvre*? It's still you they're imagining while they're chewing on the meat and two veg. Is that quite fair on anyone?"

She ambled – without the well-drilled wiggle – to the door. "It's life," she said.

. . . Forbes, at his position in front of the informator console, turned to Fellowes with a cynical grin as he switched off the overhead loud speaker. "If that's what he wants, I think I can see a shortcut."

Fellowes, drab as ever, said dully: "I can't; but it seems rather odd that he's so pushy after absorbing what was programmed on to that Communication Unit."

Forbes thought about this a second, then shook his head. "No. We're all right. That hotbox was deliberately limited to the minimum response. Otherwise, when he goes back to the Freid, the dinosaurs will go all neurotic on us."

"So what's the shortcut?"

"Simply this: Christina's C.A.V. isn't yet ready to condition Peter; and Christina herself is split. On the other hand we have a cross-section of our Mr Peter Shackleton's exact sexual requirements . . . and we must have a lady somewhere who would oblige."

"To work on him? – sounds a bit flea-pit cinema to me."

"Is that where you spend your time? Now we know! It's not like you, though, to underestimate technology, Fellowes. We must bring you up to date."

On one of the screens above him a caption appeared:

C.A.V.

(*C*haracter, *A*spect and *V*oice Simulation)

CAV/49/a-x . . . Take 1.

STANDBY

Forbes flipped the speak-key. "Rawlins, is this it?"

"No, it's not. This is merely the beginning of the circuit line-up."

"What's the schedule?"

"When enough circuits are free, Psychiatric Branch will start the Subject on the direct programming. This will be intimate and won't concern you – nor will you have a monitor screen on it."

"All right, Rawlins . . . Don't panic. I can live without it."

"They did ask me to make the point."

"Stuffy old doctors! – what's next?"

"You will then take the simulator through responses."

"The interview bit."

"Correct. We shall only want you to establish basic crosslinks – Psychiatric will do the detail."

"They *are* worried about me!"

"Anything else? I'm busy."

"Why," asked Forbes, "have you suddenly stepped up the pressure on that C.A.V.? You told me last time —"

" – Because we need another Judgement Circuit urgently. Frankly we're having troubles . . . You ought to know. There's already a bad overload and it's spreading."

"Look, Rawlins, I have troubles of my own."

"I don't doubt it."

"But I've thought of a way of neutralizing Shackleton – and the Freid – that may save us computer time."

"Then dial up an Asking Channel and put it to the network. That might keep you out of my hair." A click as Rawlins let go his key.

Forbes did so and got Line Busy. "Blast!"

Fellowes said: "Why don't you go up to the typing pool and ask for volunteers? If you're right about Shackleton, anything in a skirt would do."

"Fellowes, tell me you're joking. Go on, *please*. Tell me you're joking."

Fellowes did a pouting gesture and kept quiet.

On the third attempt Forbes got through. He gave a coding, then requested Shackleton's Object Ideal be projected on a monitor.

Immediately, a mock-up of a girl came on the screen. "So *that's* what he likes! Well, well . . .! What do *you* think of her, Fellowes? Is she your speed?"

"I dunno. But she's no Bunny, anyway."

Forbes remarked: "It takes all kinds . . ." and gave an instruction to Channel.

"Now what happens?"

"They'll match her up and find her – we've got a hundred thousand females tabulated and that model presumably exists."

"You sure he will react?"

"If he doesn't, it would be like turning his back on his own dream."

Fellowes looked at him oddly. "I wonder what yours is? Shall I have that one projected?"

"No thanks."

"We might get quite a shock if we saw . . ." – a measured pause – ". . . if we saw it."

The Bunny girl came back for the coffee cup and neither she nor Peter referred to their conversation of precisely eight minutes before.

The girl had resumed the rabbit-type gait.

She said: "You are, of course, free to go where you like; but the recorded lecture will guide you" – she handed him a Thing – "and you will find some illuminated arrows which are synchronized with the tape, so you know what each section does."

"And does it answer questions?" asked Peter facetiously.

Her eyes receded behind a protective film and the expression on her face faded, like the Cheshire Cat's grin, until only the bunny was there. It was a smiling bunny; an obliging bunny; and yet it was a bunny totally without means of communication. She left the room with shame in it.

There was no doubt in his mind, as he pressed the starter button on the Thing, that her remark, '*You are, of course, free to go where you like*' was subject to interpretation. What it really meant was that he was simply not expected to have the urge to disobey. 'And if I've worked that out wrong,' he thought, 'God only knows how many television cameras will be watching my every move.'

The Thing began, in unctuously executive tones, with a little historical build-up to what glories might follow. Evidently the mechanism was interlocked with everything that went on around it, too, for it dimmed the lights at an appropriate point in the narrative, as a cinema screen helpfully came into operation on the wall.

The story ran through the saga of automation with becoming humility, being very careful to omit nasty long words, and the commentary on the Thing was breezy.

The pictures, dutifully minimizing the intrusions into private life, flipped all the way through the pack from the first automatic signalling on a railway (the famous Automatic Train Control of the old Great Western Railway, as far back as 1905, which made it impossible for a driver to overshoot a danger signal) to the selection of mates by computer. It was all very innocuous and light-hearted, with cartoon sequences showing managing-directors firing naughty computers and so on.

The picture faded, and the Thing obligingly announced it was capable of opening and closing doors and what-not, in order to baffle the customer with science.

"Open, Sesame!" exhorted the Thing, and the double doors opened on to Servex Interlock.

"Interesting, you'd agree?" minced the Thing provocatively.

And it was. Though Peter could not, at first, place the area of human emotions that the design-scheme instantly twanged, he felt an acute sense of anxiety and tension.

"Can't quite work out what it is, can you?" preened the Thing. "There's a reason. It's because what you are looking at is based on something organic which you don't normally see. Would you like a clue . . .? Then consider the sensations you are going through at the moment. A little giddiness, perhaps? A slight ringing in the *ears*?"

Peter got it.

The Thing knew he would.

Proudly, it aced with: "What you are seeing is the very architecture of the human ear – *inside* the human ear. *Now* do you see?" He did. For the ear – that back-entrance to the brain itself – seemed to him to be the unconscious emblem of the filthiest vice already rampant in Society which, though elaborately shocked and moralistically outraged by one-way mirrors, condoned the spying ear as a deterrent for sin! It seemed to sum up the whole sickness of Servex.

For here was the evidence of the degree to which a growing cult had festered – Society had retreated into the one organ which best expressed the disease. No conceivable purpose of any value

was fulfilled by this mess of super-introspection, in which only the *inside* of humanity still had a function – however efficient its contents.

As if there were some moral virtue in micro-miniaturization, the chamber was curiously small. It was as though the inconvenient limits imposed, through considerations of weight, on the feasible size of a space capsule had been incorporated into a culture which had turned claustrophobia into a creed. Shrunk down to the minimum possible dimensions, an otherwise brilliant concept in electronics had become a morbid nightmare.

The voice on the tape said – and Peter had no reason to dispute it – that this was the most comprehensive set of control systems ever to integrate "the mechanized work-arms of Society". The voice, crazed by its own sense of obsession, rose to crescendos of hysterical enthusiasm as it referred to the compactness of the circuit designs. "For instance, on your left. Here we have an intricate network for balancing the production of plutonium against the total industrial requirements of the Western world. Not only does it control nuclear reactors – some of which are over one thousand miles apart – but it estimates the multivarious uses of the radio-isotopes produced within them in terms of consumer requirement . . . You may find it hard to beheve that only ten years ago *this one computer* would have occupied a space half the size of the Royal Festival Hall!"

Weirdly, the equipment was not housed in the familiar steel cabinets seen in the archaic sales display at TRAX; nor did it boast the usual profusion of dials and knobs and switchkeys and the galactic display of indicator lights usually seen on electronic equipment racks.

Rather did it look like living matter – great clumps of black pitch-like substance, which didn't even conform to any precise shape, appeared to rise out of the floor like hideous growths, standing bubble to bubble within the twisted cavity of a human organ only seen during autopsy. The only link with recognizable technology was the faint hum of alternating current that reverberated eerily from the far end, where the "ear drum" was.

The methods of display, in lieu of the usual meters, was essentially biochemical. "These tubes on your right actually contain highly complex organic substances which arrange themselves, in

bands of colour, at various levels in the tubes. Each tube displays, not the one isolated piece of information that might appear on a conventional dial, but over a hundred and fifty separate units of information which a skilled Scrutinizer can read at a glance."

Something was making Peter feel violently sick; but he just had time to observe one of the tubes, whose composition was quite clearly different from all the others. For instead of presenting clearly defined layers of colour, each separate from the one below and above, it showed a cloudy, amorphous treacle with neither recognizable form nor a specific tint.

It was labelled, in tiny, luminescent block letters: DAM CONTROL.

Then something happened. It was so surreptitious, so cloying in its sly intimacy, that Peter was – for the first and only time – scared on a purely superstitious level. Almost immediately this receded, when he realized that there were involved feedback mechanisms at work to account for the subtlety of the act.

For as he passed the electronic clump, it excreted a short curly length of punched tape, through a small slot near the bottom.

He ripped it away and shoved it in his pocket.

At this time, both Forbes and the wretched Fellowes were observing Peter's progress on television. But it was Fellowes who saw him taking a very close look at the Dam Control clump.

Fellowes glanced across at Forbes who had apparently missed it.

There was still no warning light on the dam section anywhere on the more conventional equipment in here. But Fellowes himself thought the Display Tube had looked a bit cloudy. "See anything?"

"No. What?"

But Rawlins on intercom: "I'm coming down."

Forbes asked why.

"Because we're in trouble . . . and I can't get anyone to see it."

Forbes shrugged. "Okay. Come on down. Tell us all about it." And to Fellowes: "Honestly, these engineering types! Always flapping . . . Ah! Screen Four; they've found the girl! And that's quick, even for Servex." He compared this with the mock-up on the next screen. "Pretty good match, don't you think?"

Fellowes said sarcastically: "So now we have a Supergirl. Only, perhaps he doesn't like supergirls. From the way he treated

that receptionist in the V.I.P. room I would have thought it was clear."

Forbes: "God! How naïve! Any psychologist would tell you —"

Fellowes – surprisingly – let his temper ride him. "Psychologists! All I can say is that if there's anything seriously wrong up at Interlock they'd better get us out of the mess they created in the first place!"

Rawlins, coffee carton in hand, entered gloomily. Despite his depressed disposition, he was erect; neck sprouting as the logical inline continuation of the spinal column. He had a smallish head and thin neither-one-thing-nor-the-other hair brushed untidily back. He had dour, slotlike lips and a long, narrow, slightly-sideways nose.

He said: "Forbes, if you insist on wasting valuable computer time for this ideal girl business I personally won't be responsible for the consequences."

"My dear fellow. You are *not* personally responsible. For that, or for anything else."

Rawlins, sipping: "Are you taking your priorities from Servex or from your own head?"

"That authorization was given through the proper channel."

"If you'll come out of your fantasy for a moment I'll try and explain just what has changed, even since you dialled for authority."

Forbes: "Whatever changes take place are clearly signalled on this panel."

"I think not." He held out a slip of paper. "An intercept. Sister Theresa trying to call Peter Shackleton at the Freid."

"Why did she expect to find him there?"

"Don't *you* know? I don't."

"Oh . . . I suppose he must have mentioned it to her when he was chasing us all over Switzerland. How interesting."

"Don't you see what it means?"

Fellowes put in: "Perhaps you should know, John, that Peter took a very interested look at the Dam Control Display Tube a couple of minutes ago."

Forbes: "What of it? Naturally he would think of dams."

Fellowes, deadpan: "There might be something wrong."

Forbes grew impatient. "If anything is wrong we immediately get a warning signal in here."

Rawlins said mildly: "But it wouldn't do anyone any harm to check."

Forbes: "Oh, wouldn't it? You know very well that Servex does not take kindly to that kind of surveillance."

Rawlins looked at him oddly: "You know, if I didn't know you better, I'd have said that you're projecting *emotions* on to plain, ordinary electronic equipment!"

Fellowes suddenly felt a thrum of panic and burst out with what had been on his mind for a long time: "You fools! If you incorporate human links into a Control system, you're stuck with emotional conflicts – and I think we've got one now."

Icily, Forbes replied: "Fellowes. When I suggested you might go to the length of using your brain, I did not anticipate you would plunge straight into the wilds of science fiction."

Rawlins, to Fellowes: "On the tee-vee, could you observe what the state of the Display Tube was?"

"Not properly. It was masked by Peter Shackleton."

Rawlins and Fellowes exchanged a quick look. It was as if a sudden doubt – a doubt, moreover, about so very many things – had beset them both simultaneously.

Both knew that, if the doubt was valid, they were both inextricably committed to a course they could not possibly change.

And Rawlins said quietly: "But . . . it *was* cloudy?"

Fellowes nodded. "*I* thought so."

Rawlins, almost under his breath: "Then why the hell isn't the fault showing here?" He checked the meters on the cabinets. And noted with a shock that even the paradox lights had gone out.

It was almost as if the thing were keeping its problems secret.

Rawlins kept the anxiety out of his voice. "Seriously, John, I think we should check."

John chose to be ultra-reasonable. "Okay, Rawlins. We'll ask Servex." He watched Rawlins' face tense up at this suggestion. "Don't you approve?"

Rawlins, a slight crack in his voice: "I have a feeling I know what answer you'll get."

But Forbes, very intensely: "But you *will* accept a Servex ruling?"

"Of course."

Forbes, to Fellowes: "Put the question to Servex – on the teleprinter!"

Fellowes: "It would be much quicker to use voice programming."

Forbes shouted: "It wants this *in writing*!"

The Thing went all jolly and said: "Now you should follow the pink arrows."

It seemed to have received an instruction, since from the tone of its voice it appeared to be surprised at itself. "*Pink* arrows," it repeated, just to make sure . . . and somehow Peter got the impression that it was being suggestive.

He was decanted, automatically, at Level A – the basement proper. Here the whoosh of air conditioning and the hum of generators made the atmosphere a lot less bizarre.

But there was something else, faintly audible, and it seemed to come through a ventilator at the end of the whitewashed brickwork. Heavy cables, both for main electricity and telecommunications, passed through a duct beneath the vent . . . but the sound that floated through was anything but electronic.

It was choral singing, and seemed to be hollowing down a long shaft, so that the intermingled counterpoint of voices and organ were scarcely discernible.

But before Peter could figure out just why a hunk of the St Matthew Passion was exuding through a ventilator the Thing said coyly, like a parent leading a favoured child to the Christmas tree: "Follow the pink arrows. Come on, now!" it encouraged indulgently, "the *pink* arrows."

At the far end of the corridor was a door, which obligingly opened upon a final squawk from the Thing.

In the room there was a girl.

Peter's first reaction, when he saw her standing there, was an intense shock which all but locked his body rigid. It didn't seem conceivable that any Intelligence, outside of his own dream-mind, could *know*; and he realized, from her gaze, that her own thoughts were identical.

The sheer accuracy of Servex' knowledge of him, of his secret lusts, of each preference for each emphasis and each mini-fetish of attire which no man is required even to admit, was indeed the most

staggering factor of all. He thought at first that the perfectly reciprocated responses of the girl and himself must fission in one heart-racing loveflash which would ever blind him to any other experience.

As the paralysis in his body changed to tremor he became able to think.

He began to realize that there were some things, common to the whole of the animal kingdom, which Servex could not hope to synthesize. And in this moment he saw and understood them. He saw that life consisted, not of precision chemistry but of the fumbling attempts of mismatched creatures at the altar of natural selection; that Man could never survive within an imposed scheme of perfection because the indulgence would be instant and the inertia complete; that living was a process of compensation for the very absence of the exact ideal; and that striving for happiness despite this was the essence of the process of change which lent purpose to one's very existence.

So he knew – as she knew – that this could never be. And he said to himself: "If you find you even *could* lay her, you're as ill as the rest of them."

So he stood there and he found her beautiful and they did not dare to touch. But his eyes said: '*You are perfect.*' And then aloud, with a voice that suddenly became perfectly modulated and even and exactly ideal for the purpose of conveying his meaning: "We must pretend."

She nodded, and though there were no tears to mar that dream-face whose every detail Peter would never forget through all waking and sleeping forever, there seemed to be all the cryings which humanity could no longer express, in the ever-tightening hand-shake with dispassionate machinery, flowing unseen as from the heart.

There were a few more seconds in which to dare to stand and watch and disbelieve; and during these, with hardly a word passing, Peter conveyed to her what must be done.

There was, well out of the way of any possible place for concealed cameras, one tiny alcove. Peter indicated that Servex must be led to believe they would mate. During this Peter would seek, via the prohibited area of the building, to escape somewhere where he might make contact with his friends at the Freid.

When she spoke, her voice touched some remote chord in his mind never before sought or found. But it meant that in the greater sense their intimacy was complete, though at no point was there so much as a single delicate brush of a yearning hand.

For she just said: "So this is tragedy."

Chapter Sixteen

PANIC did not come easily to Sister Theresa. Claws of terror, anonymous pincers squeezed within the mind, had seldom crimped a single nerve. Here on the school playground it was different.

This instant was marked by the change in attitude of the children at play. For at one moment there was the shrill zest of riotous laughter echoing around the valley's bowl, bouncing from snow-topped, green-shuttered dreamhouses; amplifying ten-year-old ripples of sudden stampede, way across the expanse of clean snow and accoustically vivid frost; hammering back and forth from mountainside to mountainside vocally in joy . . . Then, abruptly, as the head teacher strode with her determined and unsmiling gait from the school building towards the spot where Theresa stood talking to Lizbet, exuberance congealed into unnatural, stop-frame pause; the deceleration of all games to a watchful, troubled silence.

It was a long walk. During it, the throb of distant dynamos and the rush of belching water at the powerhouse, the nonstop clamour from the ice rink in the kernel of Stradt itself . . . these metronomic threats in sound superseded all optimism. The children became a tableau in the snow; their gay-patterned woollies splashing colour which their eyes suddenly denied.

The lone figure of the headmistress – halfway now across the flat no-man's-land – was the object of their dispirited, apprehensive stares.

Lizbet looked nervously over her shoulder and whispered: "She's coming!"

"Are you clear what I want you to do?"

"Yes, Theresa. I'll go and tell the other children —"

"– No! Not yet. Wait until after class."

The child, enjoying the adventure and the intrigue for its own sake, whispered: "Wait till you see their faces . . ." And she added: "Will Rabbi Ralstein be coming?"

"He's . . ." Theresa didn't quite know how to put it.

Lizbet seemed to pick it up, for she said quickly: "They've made him go away. Haven't they?" Theresa and she exchanged very adult glances. Then Lizbet chucked a conniving warning and said loudly: "Thank you, Sister! I'd love to come!"

The head teacher, an oddly grim version of the woman Theresa had known so long, said: "To what, Lizbet?"

"Why, to the Christmas party!"

"Oh."

Lizbet flashed a quick smile, for the head teacher's benefit, and ran off to join the other kids. The woman, a poised middle classer gone flat, watched the departing child, saw her whispering to the others, and turned back to Theresa. "I can't ask you in, Sister. Did you wish to speak to me . . .? Dr Moyen told me you weren't well. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"You can do something to help your children. Put them on the first bus and get them away from Stradt. It's unsafe for them here."

"I see . . . Sister, I will be frank. Yesterday I had a talk with Dr Moyen – as you know, one or two of the children here are his patients." She jerked her eyes up. There was no humanity in them. "He thinks that you are overstressed. His opinion is that you've always had some phobia about that dam up there —"

"– That's quite untrue. I've lived in the clinic for almost three years —"

"– and that your condition has got worse. And now you are worrying the children. Are you not?"

"There is reason to be worried."

"Then the proper person for you to tell is the Burgomaster – not the children."

"You must know he's away."

"Oh, yes, so he is . . . Well, p'raps you could phone the electricity people direct? – or even go into the powerhouse and speak to the people there?"

"The electricity people do not reply; and there is no one whatsoever at the powerhouse."

"Oh, yes . . . It works itself, doesn't it?" – but this was hardly a question; her mind was already on the next class and she was trying to remember which teaching tape had been left on the

machine. "I have no doubt they know what they're doing, Sister."

"I think not. Perhaps you could very kindly come with me to the top and take a look at the level of the water."

The woman looked ostentatiously at her watch. "Sister, neither you nor I has the slightest idea what that level should be, so what's the good of looking at it? I'm sorry, but there goes the school bell."

Immediate, and yet sullen, was the response of obedient children as the old bell – the one relic from the former building – called them to class. The roar of water from the turbines seemed almost the reminder that they must comply.

Theresa: "So you will do nothing? – in spite of the danger?"

The head teacher shook her head in grave concern for someone so obviously afflicted. "There is no danger, Sister," – a patronizing smile. To drive home her point she flicked a look to the top of the mountain. A row of reassuring arches, solid as the granite, gleamed concrete sunlight. The dam looked unarguably robust. Then the full authoritarian brush-off: "I'm afraid this simply cannot be allowed to go on. I don't want to do this, but if necessary I shall take steps to keep you away from here. I'm not going to ask you what was going on between you and Lizbet – though I shall have to warn her too. But Sister, you will not be admitted to these grounds for the time being, and that's all there is to it. When you are better – when Dr Moyen assures me that you're better – it will be different. Now I must say good day to you."

Theresa did not hurry away. There was nothing to hurry for. She had done everything she could think of. Every warning she had uttered had resulted in that now-familiar faceless evasion – a look so strikingly like that of the Nazis, surveying a neutral country with contempt.

There had been other symptoms. After twice attempting to place a long distance call to Peter in England, Theresa had found that the line had gone dead at the clinic. Reporting this from a public phone, she had received polite assurances that action would be taken – with no result. Calling long distance from the phone booth she had got left on a dead line however many times she tried it.

Everywhere it was the same. At the Randolf the manager had

been polite, all right . . . flitting about everywhere, trying to get her to take tea or a meal or a view of Stradt from the roof or whatever but no: the telephone was "out of order" – didn't she know that the lines to Zurich were down . . .? He couldn't get rid of her fast enough . . .

Theresa waited for the head teacher to re-enter the school building, then strode, her habit jibing taut in the gusty wind, back to the car park. She had almost reached the station-wagon, which was neatly painted with the legend *Clinic of the Snows*, when she noticed Moyen's car swing past the ice rink and pull up not far from hers. Moyen waved cheerfully as he slammed the door and walked across. They met as she opened the driver's door of the station-wagon. "Ah, Sister! Finished the shopping? Sister Mary Wilhelmina told me that in her opinion you should have stayed indoors. She thinks you are unwell, I'm afraid. Is there anything I can do?"

"Yes, I think so." Her eyes steadied on him. "You can tell me why Rabbi Ralstein was taken to hospital last night."

Moyen's eyes did not change focus. "People are usually taken to hospital because they are ill, Sister. I should imagine the Rabbi is no exception."

"Do you know what's wrong?"

"No. The Rabbi is not my patient."

"It's just," said Theresa, very distinctly, "that I was with him late in the evening and he was extremely fit at that time."

"I take it you gave him some searching diagnostic tests? – as they must have at the hospital?"

Theresa pointed up the slope. "He climbed, energetically enough, from the hotel to the dam. That's an adequate diagnostic test for most complaints."

"But maybe not for his. Would it be a surprise to you, Sister, if I told you candidly that it has been thought for some time that the Rabbi was heading for a nervous breakdown?"

"It doesn't surprise me that you say it. But perhaps I could visit him in hospital and take him comfort. Which hospital is it? – Andermatt?"

"I think it would be better for you not to worry with it."

"That is your opinion, not mine."

"Then I must carry out a most unpleasant duty . . ." Moyen

looked away. "The doctor whose patient the Rabbi is specifically asked me to see you did *not* visit him."

"*I?!*"

"I'm aware that you are good friends, Sister. But I regret that the doctor was adamant. Just for a while, anyway." He made as if to leave, then paused. Choosing his words, he asked carefully: "What were you and Rabbi Ralstein doing up at the dam?"

"We were doing what I suggest you and I do immediately, Dr Moyen. We were inspecting the unusually high level of the water."

He smiled amiably. "You know, Sister, you really are getting a little obsessed with that place. Are you not? Leave it to those who know. I do assure you there is nothing wrong. Can't you hear the generators and the turbines? All perfectly normal. Most things around here are normal, Sister Theresa."

"Except the Rabbi and me?"

"Let's talk about that another time. I really must go. I have patients to attend to . . . and, oh – one more thing: Do you mind if, just for the moment, I leave Sister Mary Wilhelmina in charge at the clinic?"

Theresa said calmly: "That decision would rest with the Mother Superior."

"Yes . . . I have seen her, in Zurich." He beamed again. "And do *relax*, Sister! Honestly, you *are* overstrung. I always said you worked far too hard. You'll realize that when you've taken a few days off. May I go now? Please?"

Theresa did not go up to the Clinic. For, remembering something the ruddy-faced guide had said on the conducted tour, she took the westerly road out of Stradt and drove by the riverside to the natural watershed.

'. . . *You can see the waterfalls further round the mountain. They are very beautiful and make many rainbows. They feed into the same river as here, but further downstream. In the thaw there is a considerable spill of water round there; but now the level in the dam is low so at present it is only a trickle.*'

Sister Theresa now reasoned thus: that however wrong she might be regarding the apparent dangers up top, the water level was, by no stretch of imagination, low.

And even her knowledge of such things told her that this should

inevitably lead to a greater fall of water being drained off by the natural safety valve of the system . . . the cascades downstream. If this were *not* the case, then the water in the dam must inevitably continue to rise until the inescapable disaster that must surely follow.

She reached the spot. There was an unearthly beauty about it. There was also an unearthly silence. It told her all she need know.

Huge icicles hanging from the steps of the great natural staircase descending from the upper mountain reaches, glistened in diffused, crystalline sunrays. Not a bird sang here in this secretive paradise. Frigid air was still; and the sound of the slamming car door glassed off the ice surface with high-pitched metallic rat-tat-tats which machine-gunned left-right-left in zigzags to the remote valleys beyond.

But of the telltale, reassuring, therapeutic flowing of water there was no sign. The sluicegates had closed. There was no way out for several additional million tons of water. Those reassuringly curved archings above Stradt were never designed to withstand anything like such a load.

Theresa, standing there in the undisturbed snow, did not pray.

But she was extremely busy planning what to do.

Rawlins said tersely over the intercom: "All right, Forbes. You have all computers on the interlock until the routine dumping at two minutes to the hour. You should have the C.A.V. Countdown Card on your Number One Screen. And *don't press* the speed of the programming . . . Remember, if we get an overload, all 'B' tapes have to be wound back and all 'B' stores cleared."

Forbes, terse, crisp, businesslike: "Roger. Yes, we have the clock on the screen." To Fellowes: "Grab the lazy-tongs mike and swing it my way . . . thanks. Don't speak unless I speak to you. If your voice goes out to line we'll get a first class muddle."

Rawlins, intercom: "Can you see the camera on you?"

Forbes looked up briefly from leafing through the notes, then back, talking, thinking, acting three ways at once – the way he liked it. "Yep. Hope I look beautiful."

Rawlins: "All right . . . fifty-eight minutes duration from . . . *now*." His voice continued as he rattled off instructions out to line. While he did this the C.A.V. countdown card unwound its

pointer towards the zero mark. ". . . Hallo Servex all links: Asking-Channel securing *a* stroke *x* for circuit-reserve booked for Subject forty-nine." These were the actual figures which identified the card now on the screen. "C.A.V. Channels jumped as listed. Maintain skeleton computer service all controls other than this C.A.V. program . . ."

Fellowes, who for a time had been an engineer in commercial television, felt that old twinge of excitement so familiar to him before videotaping the big dramas. Actually, though the jargon was different here, and though the control room was far more complex, there were many similarities between a C.A.V. session and the final taping of a show. The test card on the screen now might almost have been that preceding an *Armchair Theatre* or a *Theatre 625* . . . and the tension which heightened his colour – and almost nothing else was known to arouse him – stemmed from those agreeably neurotic days.

Such similarities were in fact only superficial; Fellowes had forgotten just how different the two things were, and to a newcomer he might have found it an exacting task explaining what was really happening now.

On the five second mark, Rawlins snapped a warning for silence and his voice went dead on the speaker. He would only come up again if the programming was getting out of hand.

Zero.

Forbes said into the mike: "Continued interview-programming of C.A.V. Simulation of Christina Teuson, Subject Forty-Nine . . ." Impatiently: "Can I have the image on the screen, please?" He turned to Fellowes: "Blast! What's the matter with it?"

Rawlins, angrily, on intercom: "There's nothing the matter with it. But you must give a Purpose Instruction first."

The screen remained blank.

Forbes said: "Simulation Purpose: to break circuit between Christina (actual) and Peter Shackleton. Both sexual and emotional links to be severed by means of synthetic antilock." And to Fellowes: "I trust Christina herself is out of the way, is she? – She'd better not see her artificial mug on this thing!"

Fellowes said quietly: "She's under sedation down in the programming quarters."

Forbes nodded, continuing to mike: "Latent and residual

effects of relationship Christina/Peter recur upon actual confrontation between them and persist when they are separated. It is therefore proposed to use substitution therapy on Shackleton. This will free Subject-Christina for full integration within the system. Check back, please."

Rawlins, intercom: "All okay."

Forbes to Fellowes: "One of these fine days the picture will finally come up. This has taken five minutes of program time already. It's like the bloody Ark, isn't it?"

Fellowes didn't comment, but said: "Just how will you drag Shackleton to a television screen and get him to talk to it?"

"I don't see that's any problem. He'll piss himself trying to get there."

"I know. But won't he smell a rat and wonder where she really is?"

"My dear chap! You don't realize that people outside Servex find this whole business quite unbelievable. Don't you remember how Stan reacted when he first saw it?"

"And now he's dead."

Forbes raised his eyes to Allah. "Oh, for God's sake! Don't let's have *Hearts and Flowers* just right now! Peter will simply think he's talking to his mistress on closed-circuit television. — See . . .? There's a clever chap!"

Rawlins: "Standby!"

Forbes: "Now he tells me!"

Rawlins: "Picture . . . *now*."

The image that flickered on the screen, stunning though it might have been to the uninitiated as a scientific achievement, was reminiscent of the early film cartoons.

This was no cartoon. Owing nothing to the inventiveness of a human artist, the coarse likeness of Christina Teuson slowly turned her head to face Forbes. The apparently animated picture looking so expectantly from the screen was nothing more nor less than the assembled result of amassed information stored on magnetic drums and recording tape. Except in terms of electronics there was nobody there. Instead half a million transistors were playing a game of charades.

This was still an early stage in the programming, and the

illusion was, in most respects, somewhat crude. Thus the face was more like Snow White than Scarlet; but undoubtedly a certain likeness was maintained, even though when she changed her expression there were obvious variations in outline, as if you were viewing the picture through shimmering water. Visual integrity varied according to angle; Christina-X's left profile, for instance, was so sketchy that the picture just blurred and became almost unrecognizable when she turned her head that way.

Speaking slowly and distinctly, John asked: "Who are you?"

The face froze still a second, then, rather jerkily, the expression changed, like an Identikit suddenly raising cardboard eyebrows and smirking at the policeman. "I am Christina Teuson," it said. The lips, though a little out of sync, did move appropriately. Forbes thought it had finished; but the expression changed with a painful jerk and it asked, quite politely: "Who are *you*?"

Forbes remarked testily: "What's this? – Minnie Mouse? We'll have to do better than that!"

Rawlins: "The picture will improve as the personality integrates."

"I'll take your word for it."

The voice, at least, was pretty good. And though it's not difficult to reproduce an actual voice when recorded, it's one thing to assemble in the right sequence a series of words merely tapped out of context without regard to their weight (according to their position in a sentence) and quite another to add expression, tonal quality to suit the sense and – most of all – the added factor of personality.

Yet this, within limits, had been done; and though there was undeniably a stilted quality in the result, the simulation would, even at this stage, have been recognizable as Christina to anyone who knew her.

Forbes tried: "Actually, you know me already."

And Rawlins on intercom: "I said, take it *slow*!"

Forbes said: "It's okay. I think It's on to it." He watched the clicks in the change of expression:

Blank
Confusion
Consideration
Searching

Then, suddenly, there came a noticeable improvement in picture definition, as the associated tape-memories married across the gigantic circuits available to Servex, and assembled a slightly more positive result. The improvement wasn't great, but visually the missing portion of the face had now acquired a line or two, and the voice came more fluently. "Yes . . . Yes! You're John Forbes."

Rawlins, resentfully: "Yes . . . but you only just got away with that, Forbes."

"Drop dead . . .! Not you, Christina." It was Fellowes who reached across and pressed the Cancel button – just in time. He kept his finger on it and chucked Forbes a grin of triumph.

"All right, cockie. For once you did the right thing. But we can't afford to plod. I'm going to jump a stage and take a Judgement question."

Rawlins snapped: "You're just asking for a breakdown."

Forbes said: "We'll take the risk. We're probably not going to need this thing – not for Peter, anyway . . . How's he making out with his supergirl?"

Rawlins said: "You're wasting time – and anyway all circuits are booked for this except skeleton controls."

"But you are videotaping down there?"

Rawlins sighed impatiently. "Yes . . . there's a machine running and you can have a playback after this session. But I wouldn't rely on anything for certain so don't bugger this thing up now."

Forbes nudged Fellowes' hand away from the Cancel button.

Immediately the face of Christina-X became attentive. And lipped attractively slightly on one side, lips a little apart, it did seem fairly human at this point.

So Forbes asked it: "What is your opinion of Peter Shackleton?"

Immediately the cartoon on the screen looked hunted and frightened.

Rawlins blared over the intercom: "Bloody fool – *cancel*!"

Fellowes tried to hit the button but Forbes stopped him.

Christina-X telegraphed Pain.

Rawlins: "Damn fool! You can't ask that; it's a taboo question!"

"Well, can't we Disinhibit?"

"You'll have to now. You'll probably get a Conflict either way; but you might avoid an overload if you take the Inhibitors out of circuit." Rawlins sounded positively incensed.

Forbes reached to his left, away from Fellowes, and threw the key.

Immediately Christina-X's face relaxed. For this moment, it was a lovely pen sketch.

"Oh, Peter . . . Where *are* you?"

Forbes threw back the switch and said, "Very touching I'm sure. Let's get on with it, and never mind the sentimental journeys . . . We'll take a Teach Question." To Rawlins: "Are the Learning circuits clear again?"

Rawlins: "Reasonably. But you're forcing the pace so much we're not getting an up-to-date indication. Go *slowly*."

"So you said before . . . Only I seem to be doing all right." Forbes again set the controls. "Christina . . . Very soon we're going to ask you to talk to Peter. You must tell him you don't want to see him. You must say that you've met someone else and that you are happy."

A long silence. The picture remained in the Attentive position.

Forbes, realizing how many steps he'd jumped and regretting it already, tried to hit the Cancel button. But the confirmatory light didn't come on – which meant he was too late.

The picture – at last – responded; and Forbes' grin anticipated success . . .

Blank
Confusion
Consideration
Searching
Anxiety/fear/terror/pain/agony . . .

Rawlins, grimly: "Now you've done it."

The image cried: "I have a terrible pain in my head! What are you *doing* to me? What are you *doing* to me, what . . ."

The picture started to flicker and then to break up. The voice dropped chromatically like a record running down.

And the screen went blank.

Forbes cursed quietly and said: "Okay, Rawlins, so I boobed. How long will it take to clear back to the sentimental bit? We'll

pick it up from there." He checked his notes . . . "Yes, *'Oh, Peter; where are you?'* – okay? Start Take-Two from there."

Rawlins, tartly: "It'll take twenty minutes to erase and reset. I *told* you to watch it!"

Forbes checked his watch. "It's all right . . . What you lose on the swings, etcetera. We made fast progress to that point and if you can give me a bit of extra time —"

"– I can't. We need the circuits. We're pushed as it is."

"Ask Servex."

"How can I? You've got virtually the whole network on this job. There aren't any Asking circuits available this side of Washington D.C."

"Okay, so call Servex in Washington. Use a GPO line and get through on the ordinary phone. They'll have some spare circuits."

Rawlins, gruffly: "Well, I'll try."

Forbes turned the lights up and leaned back against the chair, folding his hands behind his head.

Fellowes chucked him a look and said: "I don't see why you're so bloody pleased with yourself." Forbes didn't reply, and Fellowes, who looked rapt, gazed up at the screen – blank for the time being – and said thoughtfully: "It was kind of cute, wasn't it?"

Forbes swivelled the chair around and threw him a searing look. "Oh, yes, it *'was* kind of cute'! And where did you get that expression from? Your wretched days with the goggle-box racket?"

Fellowes glanced back; and decided the pique was sheer jealousy. Forbes did not wish to play second fiddle to a Silly Symphony, and his sexual makeup wasn't quite as he himself supposed. Nor did he understand the evilly-humorous look he got back from Fellowes.

Indeed, the very idea of homosexuality invariably left Forbes both revulsed and insulting. To him all homosexuals were bloody queers and he always hated being touched by them.

But what he saw in Fellowes' look was a definite anti-Servex state. The man wasn't properly programmed; and it would be necessary to ensure some further treatments with the Communications Unit before he could be relied upon completely.

As several miles of perfectly conventional Ampex videotape were

being wound back in the interlinked recording rooms, a voice came up on the Public Address system.

It said: "Will Mr Keele, standby duty engineer, please go immediately to Servex Control?"

It was a routine call, like many dozens before it.

But it was significant. Because, since the game of Cat and Mouse, certain parts of the system seemed to have acquired the ability to detect events which weren't happening at all.

That is to say, hallucinations.

It was rather as General Trefathick had said . . . for when everything is equipped for a nuclear war, it seems such a pity not to have one.

Chapter Seventeen

I've got to get out of this dungeon.

I've got to get out of a place where you get handed little messages by inanimate objects; where little black boxes take you on conducted tours and simper over a supergirl; where human rabbits cloy with words yet reserve the cushion of their proffered thighs.

I don't know where this windowless place is and somehow I've got to find out. Whatever's happening to Dam Control is only a beginning, but a drowned village is a promising start for the destructive snowball.

Not snowball – Plasticine. Society is getting rolled into Plasticine . . .

I've got to warn them at the Freid that it's even worse than Stranger's nightmare; and whatever is on that bit of punched tape he'd better know.

It's not going to be easy to get out of here because any moment they're going to find out that I'm not wowing it up with their supergirl for the benefit of half a dozen television cameras and that means they'll guess that those crumby headphones didn't succeed with the syntho-litany . . . If we hadn't got the computers so confused already they would probably have known within nanoseconds . . .

Ah, this manhole looks promising . . . Any cameras? Any mikes? There must have been one at the bottom of the lift shaft, because the Thing knew that I dawdled at the ventilator – and where in hell was that choral singing coming from? One thing at a time, fellas.

Now . . . where would this manhole *lead*? The street? No, that's far too much to hope for.

Or maybe there's a bloke standing on top of it. He'll think Hell is opening up beneath his feet. And *that* wouldn't be far out.

. . . Well, dammit! They wouldn't shove a manhole in the

ceiling if it didn't lead somewhere – and how do you get this blasted ladder away from the wall? Let's think the way they do – the way Servex does. It would have some electronic lock, wouldn't it? I mean, a good old-fashioned hasp would do just as well; but that's too simple. So how about this twee little row of buttons?

Allow me . . .!

. . . I'd better push up this plate goddam carefully. That's hunky-dory: one millimetre at a time . . . Christ! Don't *squeak* like that! Don't you have oil cans in Servex?

What's this, then? Right by the opening?

Rubber!

A rubber tyre. A truck. Great balls of fire, it's John Forbes' plush tee-vee wagon!

I'm in the garage!

What's that? There's luck for you. That must be an air compressor just starting up. That should cover me.

I feel like Harry Lime, deftly emerging from the sewer.

Oh, God? Where's Christina?

And why do I ache to reach her, to touch her, to hear her voice, when a few minutes ago I could accept immunity from perfection?

But then, I suppose we're all scared of perfection . . . Natural guilt – we're just not worthy of it.

Fuck it! Just caught my finger on that damn flange and I'll do something worse if I don't concentrate . . .

Let's see; those are the main doors – and they'll be covered by cameras for certain. Better try somewhere else.

The elevators.

If I take a ride to the roof, shouldn't there be a fire-escape? How could they put up a building without one? Servex may grind exceeding small, but not so small as an urban district council.

Well, there's no one around . . . Why not?

Going up . . . Face the front of the car, please . . . First floor: Ladies' Underwear and Bunny tails.

They'd better not know when their lifts are working . . . I wouldn't put it past that crazy earhole, though. All those clumps of bulbous electronic grey-matter, whispering to each other about me . . . At least there doesn't seem to be anywhere they could hide a television camera in this lift.

Roof level . . . Restaurant, roof garden . . .

And what . . .?

Peter looked out over the top of the parapet and instantly the growing sense of hysteria and isolation disseminated. The view was so unarguably logical. For what he saw threw it all into perspective. Universal Servex had begun here – as elsewhere – even long ago in Richard Stranger's day, when Dr Moyen and he had shared the same environment, drawing up – even then – at their opposing positions.

Then later, John Forbes had followed . . . only to come into contact with Dr Moyen – probably by chance – to weld another rivet into place which marked the trend to come.

So here, in the erudite and raucous and companionable and detached atmosphere, others had walked thoughtfully and amicably – and noisily and drunkenly – along Trumpington Street, in formative years when ideas held and developed and materialized into actions and cultures; they had immersed themselves and each other in progressive concepts – some straightforward and sensible and exciting, others twisted and insane and toxic – and had finally decanted themselves into a world to whom change was always promising because how could things get any worse?

So Peter stared, and stared hard, to make sure he actually believed it.

But, in all conscience, who could mistake the clock tower at the entrance to King's College? Who could mistake the austere outline of Trinity, the elegant modesty of Corpus?

Who could doubt the source of choral singing, when there, perfect in all proportions even when viewed from the heights of a brand new skyscraper, was the pinnacled dignity of King's College Chapel? The grass in the Court was of the greenest; and the trees shielding the river beyond were ancient and restful.

For this was Cambridge, as Cambridge ever was.

The priority telegram addressed to George Verolde never reached him, so the text is purely of academic interest. It's hardly worth printing but it's on the record so we reproduce it here:

VEROLDE RANDOLF HOTEL STRADT SWITZERLAND

PRIORITY + DEC 23 2300Z, PENT WASHINGTON DC

IMMEDIATE INVESTIGATION ORDERED REGARDING ICC CAMBRIDGE ENGLAND BRITISH HOME OFFICE UNDERTAKEN REPORT IN FULL US

EMBASSY LONDON FOLLOWING FINDINGS RE AIR CRASH AIR EUROPEDA FLIGHT 9A VITAL YOU VOLUNTEER ANY INFM RELEVANT TO SVX CONTROL AS SITUATION NOW OUT OF HAND HERE STATE OF EMERGENCY DECLARED CAPE KENNEDY IN VIEW LOSS OF CONTACT GEMINI THRU FAILURE COMPUTERS AT CMC URGE YOU DROP EVERYTHING FLY WASHINGTON FIRST AVAILABLE AIRCRAFT ALL FORMALITIES WAIVED WILL MEET POLICE ESCORT NOTIFY ETA=

TREFATHICK

Possibly Trefathick would have pursued a different course had he realized that the curious lack of interest shown by a number of colleagues in the spreading chaos throughout the United States was not just chance. It was a symptom; and the baffled eyes of radar operators observing cluttered oscilloscopes, at several key locations on the Early Warning System, did not see the grecnish blips that indicated targets.

Instead they saw dreams.

This symptom was more prevalent at Stradt than anywhere else. Verolde, escorting his V.I.P. party over the dam, leered fatuously as the last guests to arrive (they came in a green Aston-Martin) pulled up crazily on the road which ran right across the dam wall.

There were no guides and no engineers and even at this early hour – it was five o'clock in the afternoon – few of the party were sober. Champagne bottles, chucked indiscriminately into the world's largest ice bucket, floated empty on the dam surface and clinked against the concrete.

The red mark which indicated the maximum permissible height of the water above datum was by now twenty-seven feet below the surface.

Tom and Dick aided Harry along the last few yards from the car and Tom, the least drunk of the three, combed his hair meticulously. "What's happened to the girl supply, George?"

Verolde grinned. "Later. I had 'em flown in. They'll be at the Randolf in — " . . . he consulted the large, black-dialled wristwatch . . . " – a half hour."

Dick straightened an elegant cufflink and said: "Who selected them?"

"Funny you should ask me that," said Verolde, drilling him with eyebeams. "We found the darnedest things on your punchcard –

it took some while to find one girl who could actually provide the entire service singlehanded!"

Peter stood on the fire-escape for a few seconds, then thought of the bit of punched tape he still had in his pocket. The message had been for him – he was sure of that. Wasn't it worth translating it before phoning the Freid?

The lift arrived and slid back its gates obligingly. Peter mistrusted its obsequiousness; but driven now by a compelling sense of goal he chose to be rash. And as he waited while the lift took him to the level where he had originally alighted with Forbes, he felt that – at least philosophically – this decision made a kind of sense. For Servex was essentially *passive* . . . It therefore might well be taken unawares by an aggressive, spontaneous act.

So he let the doors slide open and he stepped out into the huge space where the conventional computers and the conventional technicians and the conventional secretaries bustled about, bursting with technological enterprise – and of course, nobody stopped him.

He went up to someone in one of those white coats and held up the punched tape. "I want to check this output tape," he snapped. "We're overhauling in the other wing" – he waved vaguely towards the Ear section – " and I wondered . . .?"

The whitecoated man seemed only too pleased to oblige, as if contact with someone from the inner sanctum might rub off on his promotion sheet and make him a better man. "Of course," he said, folding his Anglepoise arm around Peter's shoulder, "Come right this way!" As he escorted him along the corridor he asked: "Do you want your punched tape put on the feedback chain? We can check it out, you know, all the way back to Washington! Would that . . . be of use?"

"Well, not just at the *moment*, thanks . . ." Peter saw the man's face fall so he added hastily: "but we have to pour some software through the system tomorrow – we're lining up a new circuit. So perhaps then . . .?"

Honour was satisfied and the engineer looked tremendously chuffed, swinging open the door of a minor programming room as if it were some celebrated tomb . . . "Well, you know the machine, of course. So if you don't want me . . .?"

"Thanks. Thanks very much."

The punched tape needed less than one second to rattle through the translator. The message it came up with seemed wistfully pathetic:

WHICH DAM DO YOU MEAN?

A brisk pace back along the corridor and no trouble from the boys. Quite the contrary; their eyes were lifted up in loving supplication towards one of the gods from Through There. Peter couldn't resist the Prince Philip touch; and planting his hands behind his back he quipped to the room in general: "You're far too efficient in here – the computers are threatening to walk out." He waved the bit of tape. "Official!" Pleasurable twitters and the Freedom of the Hall. Peter bolted the hell out of there for the lift.

From high on the building he took a brief look across the street and wondered what had possessed the planners of Cambridge to permit the erection of a skyscraper in the middle of all this Culture. No doubt one computer had twisted the arm of another and got its own way through a new variant on strong-arm tactics; but it wasn't until he was halfway down the fire escape that the situation became clearer.

In letters so huge they were hard to read at such close quarters the building shouted its face-value *raison d'être*. The Trust Fund had evidently been at it again; for in shameless plastic and chrome that hardly went with neighbouring King's College Chapel the Broadway lettering read:

INTERNATIONAL CYBERNETICS CENTRE FOR NEUROLOGICAL RESEARCH

. . . and, of course, no University knows how to fight that.

Thus enlightened, Peter took the remaining ten flights two steps at a time so as to get clear of the place before the blushing technocrats could recover from their shocked state of flattery.

He needn't have bothered; for the concealed equipment in the window of *Diamond Radio and Television* was not feeling nearly so sycophantic. A tee-vee camera, rotating its turret and choosing thereon a telephoto lense, had located him on the fire-escape within ten seconds of his quitting the lift.

For reasons which even the Freid Institute hadn't envisaged, the persecution-mania of the Servex organism had advanced catastrophically. Had they known, though, at the Freid, that the C.A.V.

programming of Christina had already begun, they would have foreseen that she must inevitably become the amplifier for the galloping schizophrenia now apparent. Brainwashing does not alter the deeply subconscious Id, and souls who are in love remain in love. But now the whole machinery of Servex was trying to take the average of her opposing aims. Consequently a subtle – and fundamentally dangerous – force was applied to the computer the moment Christina came in intimate proximity with it – as she did in the programming quarters deep below. This was bad enough; but when the object of her thwarted but despairing need – Peter – was positively identified by the telephoto camera, a violent feedback signal belched right through the system, knocked out a whole bank of flipflops and raised electronic hell. Borrowing circuits booked for the C.A.V. for just long enough – fifteen microseconds – to do the sum, the Servex monster cried *Traitors . . .*! and sent a warning pulse halfway across the earth.

The ripple ran through the subcentres in London and from there branched off two ways.

On the Continental leg it alerted the network through France, and immediately married with a chain of pulses whose source was originally the phone-tapping subnetwork which had traced Sister Theresa's attempt to contact Peter at the Freid. Back flashed the signal *Isolate*! – which meant that these two of all people must on no account be permitted to communicate with each other.

The circuits co-opted by the defence mechanism of the Servex interlock for this purpose were those which normally would have raised an alarm signal to draw attention to the perilous level of water in the Stradt Dam . . . So that on the Stradt position at Wardour Street in London no red light appeared that might have made the difference; and certainly no warning current could flow along the hopelessly overloaded lines which ran back to Cambridge

The situation on the transatlantic leg was even worse. True, an Instruction Channel was automatically acquired to pass the news, provided by the camera in the radio shop now trained on Peter, that the inevitability of his passion for the supergirl was pure myth; and equally true, the meters beneath the engine room at Ding Dong kicked frantically across the dial and matched within fractions of a second the behaviour of similar ones in New York and Washington; but these cables were supposed to be sorting out an internal

difference of opinion that was going on, within those clumps in the Ear sections, as to which dam was meant regarding the message that something somewhere had run amok. One half of the system thought this meant the Bona Dam in Oklahoma and the other half thought it referred to Stradt; and now the last channel which might have solved the frantic equation – before it was too late – was occupied by television pictures pointlessly re-transmitted across the Atlantic – both ways. In consequence this branch had gone into a state of Hunting – an endless ataxia between two extremes of possibility – thus saturating the system.

. . . Nostalgic human beings, who still remembered a time when a few overworked telephone lines were – at worst – an inconvenience, might still have commented, had they known of the chaos within Servex, that this wasn't going to upset their round of golf at the weekend. Indeed, the sales executives of computer companies were still to be found, on this memorable day, lunching potential buyers of their wares. The accelerating lunacy of Servex in no way changed the flavour of the contract brandy in many a director's dining room. On these lines the final preparations were now completed for the gargantuan feast at the Randolf in Stradt . . . and the last act of the headwaiter before okaying the layout of the tables (which was to order that the avocados be placed with the narrow ends all pointing towards the forks and not the knives) coincided exactly with the moment in Washington when General Trefathick picked up a red-coloured telephone in the war room and asked tremulously of the general commanding Missile Base O-Forty just why the hell the place was to be evacuated of all personnel . . .?

Trefathick didn't dare say so to any one of the brass hats around him, but he had a fearful feeling that the voice at the far end had sounded . . . sounded *how*? Almost *mechanical* . . .? And yet, it was a voice he knew so well!

He simply couldn't afford to admit to this bizarre notion – no one had ever forgotten what had occurred way back. Here in the war room troubled eyes, glowering and suspicious, were triangulating on him from all around the conference table: he was trapped by his past history of hysteria in a present situation wherein "hysteria" was now not just advantageous but obligatory. Glazed in the eye, he glared back at all those hats, thick with

martial fruit salad . . . and decided to check with Servex London first, before he committed himself. So going to a phone in the comms room next door he attempted to place the call.

He never got through; and nor was he the only one. The clutter was so great and the queue so long that even priority calls were aborted. Servex was literally snatching at channels of communication before they were free; and to make matters even worse – if that were possible – a redundant censure signal was going back to the C.A.V. room at Cambridge, complaining about the reliance upon the use of a videotape recorder to watch Peter and the supergirl – with the consequent delay in spotting the blunder – even though this decision to trust in the infallibility of their mating had been Servex-authorized in the first place.

The first indication Forbes got that Peter Shackleton wasn't with the supergirl at all came from Rawlins, who yelled something from his control room in another part of the building and fed the picture of Peter Shackleton transmitted by the camera in the shop window so that his image appeared on Screen 2.

Rawlins was very careful how he handled Forbes over this; the last thing he could afford was any further instability within a system already grotesquely out of control. So he added: "But take no action until we get a Servex decision. There may be a simple way out."

But Rawlins received back that phenomenon exactly which conforms to the function of an electronic invertor. "Poor old Rawlins! The one time when we should use our own heads, you have to preach to me what I've been telling you all along! How can a computer reach out across the street and drag the man back?"

Actually it could have done precisely this but neither could see it. Rawlins did go so far as to realize that militant action would not only be completely out of character but would additionally leave the computers in the dark as to the actual state; but he couldn't answer the question; and moreover the computer circuits were too overloaded to provide the answer immediately.

So he had to listen to Forbes, saying with all the malice of which his scared libido was capable: "We'll get that little bastard back all right!" and immediately phoning down to the ambulance bay before he could be stopped. Thereafter he snapped at Rawlins on the intercom: "Don't *flap*, man! As soon as we get him back here

we can let this C.A.V. do the rest. And the sooner *that's* taken care of the better!"

Peter, as he jumped the seven foot drop at the bottom of the fire-escape, was well aware that he was by now singularly unpopular with quite a number of people/machines – though when he crossed the street on the double he didn't realize that he was heading straight for a tee-vee camera – the one in the radio shop.

His one thought was the phone box, which nestled promisingly in an alleyway between the shop and what looked like a disused cinema. But he did glance in the shop window, noted that being screened at that moment was a news special on the glossy tee-vees in the window. It showed a film shot of General Trefathick, sun-goggles and all, stepping down from an Air Force 707 and walking virtually into the arms of the President, who didn't look happy.

As Peter stormed the phone box, early darkness began to etch into the skyline. But though studiedly quaint streetlamps, mounted on the irregular walls above the flagstones, were timed to switch on at dusk, nothing happened. Dusk was getting its own way.

The automatic trunk dialling system, however, was not; and Peter had to place the call to Freid via the operator. During the delay he noticed that an ambulance had pulled up at the end of the alleyway – and he got the message.

Stranger himself came up on the line and sensed the urgency. "Give me one fact."

"Cambridge! Servex has a place in Cambridge!"

"Got it! Time for another quickie?"

"The Dam in Stradt. Try Sister Theresa at the clinic. The thing may blow."

"One more . . . *fast*!"

The four men had now reached the box. One of them had a syringe handy. He looked sort of ludicrous: but somehow the idea of enforced sedatives gave Peter an inspiration. "Get to Ding Dong. Tap the cable. Contact me by line if you can . . .!" – and the phone was snatched from his hand. Peter knocked the intruder flying, then tripped flagstones as he raced down the alleyway. There was a police car, beacon flashing, at the far end – but no

matter. He darted behind the jutting excrescence of the old cinema, took the stone stairs two at a time which ran up beneath an antiquated sign marked *Balcony*. Trickle of plumbing and the raucously distorted soundtrack of a film. The cinema – despite its festering appearance – wasn't disused at all.

The stone steps led into a sort of lounge and this looked as if it hadn't seen a new coat of paint since the thirties. Hideous bare walls, painted crude orange, betrayed old grime and oily patches below the long line of coat-hooks in the cloakroom section. Near by stood three battered upright pianos which provided a permanent incubator for the moths.

The coarse blare from the sound track was louder in here. An instruction film whirred audibly from the projection booth near by – but the terse commentary was obliterated by the tortuous, labyrinthine acoustics of the stale-smelling surroundings. A rattling air-conditioning fan, blowing through a duct from which the grill sagged amid peeling wallpaper, had one blade fouling the hollow. It punctuated the soundtrack with fusilades; but when Peter heard the words "*What you are seeing is the very architecture of the human ear*" he knew for certain – this was an instruction film for Servex recruits.

A pause for a few moments on creaking old boards. No escape except via the auditorium. And a bloody awful smell of urine to boot.

He shoved on the swing doors and just as he did so the lights came on. Immediately, a huge tee-vee blow up of Forbes himself gracing the screen.

Forbes' voice boomed around the place with the news that a patient of the Cybernetic Centre was wandering the streets endangering himself. The co-operation of the audience was required as it was suspected that he might have run into the cinema.

A shot of Peter was then shown on the screen. At the top right-hand side of frame was the standard pylon emblem.

"*There he is!*" squeaked a semi-pubic voice from two rows down; and Peter had to hurdle the end of the row to reach the opposite exit, which gave back on to Trumpington Street. Here, fortunately, there was a traffic jam (still no street lighting) and Peter hared it away past the entrance of King's.

But he was again unlucky – for a policeman had got into position

with a walkie-talkie and stood watching the cars from a position some fifty yards beyond the entrance to the Fitzwilliam Museum. Peter dashed up the steps and had the rubber flanges of the revolving doors revving like an aero engine.

The museum, by comparison, was creepily quiet. Peter walked ponderously up the Baroque staircase, and contrived to appear hungry for culture.

At the upper level there seemed to be more floor polish than Peter had ever seen in one place; and he momentarily wondered whether the pictures so hygienically hung had always enjoyed such polythenic precision for their setting.

"Sorry, sir," said a steward sharply to a youngster with a leather strap dangling a box from his shoulder. "No cameras."

"It isn't a camera," said the youth.

"Oh? What is it, then?"

"My lunch."

"It's his lunch, he says," repeated the steward to a colleague, who had, however, lost interest in this encounter because his attention was drawn to the entrance hall. Evidently there was some sort of disturbance down there and Peter didn't wait to find out what. He was far more interested in the possibility of finding a back entrance. You can't push huge masterpieces through a revolving door and there had to be another door somewhere. In any event, Peter felt things had got a little too hot in the French Impressionists so he clacked the floor polish to give the Italian Renaissance a try.

Here, amid the superb proportions of the Upper Marlay Gallery was at least temporary respite – for a group of eager globetrotters from some enthusiastic University in the States here attentively listening to a fussy, nervous young professor with terribly clear diction and a singularly hesitant manner. The combination, which comprised a sort of academic stop-go policy, had his audience so anxious for him that they were nearly as jumpy as he was.

"The Renaissance," faltered the lecturer, "was the great Awakening; both in the arts and in spiritual, um, affairs." He didn't quite like the dangerous inference of the word *affairs* and this damaged the sentence which followed. ". . . spiritual affairs that swept across Europe in the fifteenth century and brought life to.the pictures which you now see."

Urgent voices were now audible from the staircase and Peter quietly shifted up towards the far end of the gallery.

"It was the age," hastened the professor, alarmed at his choice of vocabulary, "of Leonardo and of Michelangelo. And looking around at the priceless masterpieces in this room, you may well think that art had . . ." With the air of someone who had always known the rug would be pulled from under his feet in the end he allowed his voice to trail off and wanted to die.

His students lost interest instantaneously in the arts and acquired a new one. For suddenly the place seemed alive with men in white coats; and they all had the same indulgently kind and yet menacingly ruthless expression which people fondly suppose is an appropriate one for mental patients. A glint and a smile, at one and the same time, does not present human nature at its best; and Peter reacted in kind.

Seeing his exit blocked off at this end of the gallery, he doubled back towards the main staircase, with the intention of dealing with any opposition according to the glint rather than the smile.

At the point in this violent manoeuvre when Peter realized – too late – that carpets placed loosely across some of the more highly polished boards in the whole of Cambridge are first cousin to the ignominious banana skin, it occurred to him that there was a sharp and painful difference between the higher points of heroism in the movies, and the undignified anticlimax of falling, in mere real life, on your arse.

No doubt the inoffensive seekers-after-culture were normally sympathetic towards the mentally afflicted; but right now the growing titter, that came hot on the heels of the thud that shook the gallery end to end, presented an indignity that made the business of being dragged back to the dangers awaiting him inside Servex seem paltry by comparison.

What was unbearable was the impact of farce upon a cause.

Chapter Eighteen

CLOSE to the elegant long-case clock, in the little porch of the Clinic of the Snows, stood a Christmas tree. Sister Theresa knew for certain that the tree could never last out for the holy day for which it had become the emblem. But she had done what she had done.

After visiting the watershed, in its terrifying remoteness and its totally articulate silence, she had driven straight back through Stradt and taken the pass road to Andermatt.

The large and amiable proprietor of the Schweizerhof Hotel had ushered her away from the routine paperchains and paper bells and paper Christmas and into his little office behind the reception desk. There he had listened, pouring two coffees from a percolator. "You perhaps guess my own phones are being tapped . . .? I think possibly I might cross the border into France. Perhaps I could warn someone that way?" He looked doubtfully in her direction; and her little shake of the head was the reaction he expected.

"It's no use," she said. "You will go round in circles."

"Yes. Then what am I to do?"

"Hire a very large bus," said Theresa.

. . . Silently, the two of them had ridden alongside the mystified driver and parked in the darkness near the playground. There, Theresa had stood a second time this day, waiting to see if the message she had sent a few hours before, via the one little girl who frequented the clinic for love and who avoided Sister Mary Wilhelmina through hate, had reached those for whom it had been intended.

During these tense minutes of waiting for the children, the sound of swirling water by the powerhouse suddenly ceased. The town lights – fed as they were from the main supply system of which the hydro-electric station was only a part – remained

illuminated; but Theresa's mind was not on the illuminations.

The proprietor's cigar glowed bright, then dim again. "The generators have stopped."

"Yes."

"That means there is now no outlet at all for the water . . ." the glow did a loop in the darkness . . . "up there."

"That's right."

The proprietor breathed heavily. "And if we warned the rest of these people?"

"Then they'd simply stop the children leaving."

"Yes . . . Of course they would. But I think perhaps the children won't come. They are late."

"We'll see."

"The people in my hotel are lucky."

"The people in that one up there are not."

"Is it true," asked the man, "that George Verolde is giving one of his parties up there tonight?" He spoke in English. "What the British call 'swinging' parties?"

"I wouldn't be surprised," said Theresa. "It has the fearful sting of suicide about it."

"Rough justice," said the proprietor. "Verolde is a beast, who sins by not spending his money in my hotel. I understand this sort of sin and no other. Please do not think I have become holy tonight. I should be extremely embarrassed. All the time I make much money out of much sin."

Theresa's lips curved faintly in the darkness. "God won't embarrass you, I promise," she said.

"Perhaps, then, you can persuade Him to come and stay at my hotel?"

Theresa was saved the challenge of answering so outrageous a question for at that moment Lizbet ran up. "Where's your bus?" she demanded.

Theresa pointed across to the car park.

"Yes," said Lizbet, critically, "it is *quite* a big bus. But it's an *awful* funny time for a ride!" Lizbet peered interestedly at the cause of the glowing cigar, asked him if he was going too, said "good!" and went on: "Theresa . . . you know you told me not to say anything in school?"

"Yes?" Theresa was terrified that the head teacher might have stopped the rest of the children.

"It's only that she tried to get me to tell her what you'd been saying. And when I wouldn't, she made me put on a pair of telephone things."

"Headphones?"

"That's right."

Theresa felt her face tauten. "And . . . what happened?"

"Oh," said Lizbet brightly, "I didn't want to listen in the least. So I pulled the plug out."

. . . The rest of the children started arriving – first ones and twos, soon in their numbers. They were orderly and quiet and apparently carrying out very strict instructions issued by Lizbet.

Only one parent couple turned up with the children. Hesitantly the mother asked Theresa: "This? It isn't quite the truant game you've led the children to believe?"

"I'm afraid not."

The father, a little scared of being named a coward, asked hesitantly: "Do you think you could find room for us?"

"You don't think I would refuse you?"

The heavily-laden bus slunk like a spectre from the car park, eased past the ice rink, reflecting glitter from its shining coachwork, then up the steep gradient back towards Mount Susten. A few hundred yards up Theresa left the bus, looking briefly into the sad, spaniel eyes of the large and amiable proprietor of a hotel shortly to be bulging with the first *gratis* guests ever to outrage his sense of morality.

"Who pays?" he cried. "This is what is my big concern." The features around the pudgy nose slackened out of the desperate smile. "Goodbye . . . and good luck Ach! That is the wrong thing. You believe only in this God who refuses to stay at my hotel . . ."

Theresa was smiling faintly at this as the old clock struck one. She knew she must die with her patients. Her one attempt to move them had met with militant opposition. Moyen, alerted on the telephone by Sister Mary Wilhelmina, had reacted, enraged and at once, by demanding police surveillance. Two men now sat in the tiny office. They were playing dice.

The barman who thrust open the swingdoors leading to the Finger bar of the Randolf remarked to a fellow waiter as he sped through: "Have you ever known them act like this? It revolts me – and I thought I'd seen everything."

His colleague set off in the reverse direction. "I've just been detailed off to fetch up another crate of Schnapps from the cellars. Who threw the drink at you, anyway?"

"That bastard Verolde."

"He is mad."

"He is rich. I am told: Say nothing! Do not complain! So! Now I go up and I change and the house-keeper has to provide all fresh clothes."

"Mad."

"That's what I think."

The staff wing was accessible via a catwalk which ran, glass-enclosed, across the gap between the hotel proper and the changing rooms.

It was while the barman, still sore and humiliated, was walking through that he noticed something different from the usual. It took a while to figure what it was. Then he realized.

The thunderous sound of the turbine water was missing.

It certainly seemed to leave the night curiously still . . . and, he thought, in some unaccountable way – ominous.

George Verolde slammed his glass hard into the corner, the nick of the finger, and by now even his co-directors of the hotel seemed to lose their sense of amusement. Instead of the riotous laughter that had accompanied earlier fun and games there was an unpleasant hush into which Verolde roared: "But not one of you would have the guts to blackball me out of a goddam sewer!"

He stumped out of the bar and slapped the swingdoors drunkenly against the stops. The smell of grilling steak in here seemed to nauseate him. He managed not to vomit, but rammed through the restaurant and emerged in the ballroom beyond. Here they were freaking it out to Mach number seven; and Verolde was the Nero to whom they looked for further improvements.

Coloured lights and Musiconics seemed to marry across the entire spectrum of social disorder; and the twisting, interlaced bodies of copulating couples on the floor were merely the insects who, totally unaware of their own being, performed the auto-

mated coupling while hallucination transported them elsewhere for sensation. Tom, Dick, and Harry were now a composite part of the Plasticine from which Verolde alone stood out.

There was no difference, once the orgy had gone full-circle, between the younger psychedelics and the older alcoholics, for opposing motives had led to the same anaesthetized zero point where two curves intersected. All meaning cancelled and only the amplifiers performed a sequential function.

Two worlds, each finding the other intolerable, finally reached futility point when a young girl, torquing her body in synthetic ecstasy, unzipped Verolde's flies. He responded with conditioned reflex; tearing her frail dress away but revealing in his own exposed prick the absolute indifference which spoke the fraud.

Somehow the message travelled; and Verolde's sexual whimper slowly became the focus of ridicule. And just as the Musiconics achieved its thundering climax, in direct contrast to Verolde who did not, there came the first muffled thud from somewhere overhead. Dick, who had been watching Verolde in faint amusement, intuitively raised his cocktail glass – a male model in salute of something he sensed as death. In his way he was brave.

But Verolde suddenly forgot the humiliation of a reluctant penis and gawked with a stiffening of horror as he stood, arms outstretched, looking up at the ceiling.

It was a brief tableau only – there was no chance of stampede. All eardrums burst with sudden pressure and there was therefore little sound actually heard, as the entire ceiling lowered itself, virtually in one solid piece, like an hydraulic ram. The human contents of that room were pressed out of existence.

The waterwall, having hurled its initial thunderbolts of concrete before it, now overtook the pulverized hotel and moved in one continuous mass down the gulley.

While gigantic boulders bounced like colliding planets high over the chair-lift ripek, the barrage raced towards Stradt, carrying pylons like playthings away from their concrete foundations and arcing the cracking air with brilliant flashes that exploded Stradt into floodlight and yet simultaneously plunged it into darkness as the power failed.

It tore the Clinic from its roots and thudded the walls which entombed Sister Theresa into their component brickwork while

her hand was still occupied in the execution of the devout act.

From there the growing blister of unleashed power, which had ceased to be mere water but which was the expression of the force of gravity itself, boomed down the ski-runs, tearing up the snow and incorporating it like milk into its murderous progress towards the town.

Here the water met the mountain facing it.

The impact was so great that it was felt the other side of the mountain long before the sound of the water-collision reached around the pass and entered Andermatt the other way.

The children, still awake from their slow ride through the pass, did not understand and were not told what the nature of the bomb was nor where it had struck.

But the large and amiable proprietor of the Schweizerhof Hotel felt and heard the impact and picked up the little coffee spoon that had tinkled from the desk top as a result.

Without any expression on his face he turned the spoon thoughtfully over in his pudgy hands.

Then, very gently, he replaced it in the saucer.

General Trefathick put the helicopter down with feline sensuality, so that its paws drew their sharp shadows into themselves till they touched ground. He cut the motor and four blades, sagging as if from the blazing heat, swished to a gradual stop. A metallic click from the seat harness as Trefathick unbuckled. The straps were soaked with sweat.

Even so, Trefathick didn't quit the Perspex bubble. It was home. Here in the chopper was a semblance of normalcy . . . A crunched pack of cigarettes belonging to the pilot still lay on the instrument panel and his log book was still there on the seat.

Outside, vibrating from baked air which rose off the desert flats, was Base O-Forty.

Base O-Forty was listed as containing 4,200 officers and enlisted men of the United States Air Force. Additionally, in the married quarters on Susu Hill (two miles and one quarter from this spot) there were claimed to be 970 air-conditioned wives and 3 schools-full of children. Wives and children, though, were penned in . . . they were never allowed anywhere near this area and

were arrested even for looking. Base O-Forty could fight a nuclear war without their help.

For that matter it could fight a nuclear war without anyone's help. All it needed was an opponent. Like for instance Vridemsk, which was some 320 miles from Moscow. Vridemsk would have done very well. The differences in the two bases were purely superficial. The fans in the air conditioners, on the married site out there, rotated counterclockwise.

The General listened to the gyro motor gradually whining down through the scale. He checked switches, fuel cocks, brakes. He did this very carefully: for there was no one to help if he couldn't restart.

Base O-Forty was extremely deserted.

Before leaving the bubble, Trefathick tried the radio one last time . . .

"Calling Charlie Mike Charlie, this is Romeo X-ray. Do you read?"

Of course they didn't "read". 'Charlie Mike Charlie' was the phonetic nomenclature for Central Military Computing, and wasn't in the least interested in Romeo X-ray. Charlie Mike Charlie was not even capable of assembling the phonetic alphabet in the correct order. How could it? – with all that boiling insulation oozing from its guts?

"Calling Charlie Mike Charlie, this is Romeo X-ray. Go to manual control. Go to manual control . . . This is Cleve Trefathick. For God's sake answer me . . . *Anyone?*"

Actually, the last transmission heard from Charlie Mike Charlie had been that containing the command for the evacuation of Base O-Forty. No one knew from whence this command had originated; but it carried the appropriate "duplex-integration" coding . . . in other words the order was validified by virtue of the fact that the transmission was only able to be made if a stage-by-stage acknowledgement was received back, in voice-code, from the military commander at Base. The voice-code was changed daily, and the key was known by exactly three people in the world: The President of the United States, the Unit Commander concerned, and the Head of Telecommunications. Duplex-integration could only operate upon recognition of the right voice, using the right words, in the right sequence.

The order had gone through.

In so doing, of course, the instruction had placed an electronic lock on the one-foot steel door of Central Control, Base O-Forty. The contact-charge required to blow this place open was two thousand pounds of TNT.

The General flicked the switch through each radio channel in turn. There was life only on one of them. A nice, friendly, casual voice giving a weather forecast. The General did not raise his arms in whoopee. The weather forecast, which was already two days out of date, sprayed downward from an orbiting satellite containing a tape recorder almost exactly the same size as Trefathick's wristwatch. The easy-style drawl of the all-American boy on tape faded to nothing as the satellite passed below the horizon till the next time around.

Trefathick cut the radio switch and even the gyro motor had died. The thrum of heat – not exactly a sound, but it was, in a way, tangible – was all there was left. So Trefathick opened the door, glanced briefly at the log book, as if wondering vaguely why the pilot had thrown himself out of the machine in flight, and alighted.

He searched around among the outer concrete buildings for some considerable time, not really sure of what he wanted.

Till he found a car.

As a matter of fact it was a very big and rather beautiful car; and so new it wasn't even on release. General Motors, who were testing it, had lent it to the Unit Commander for reasons that were obscure.

Trefathick got in it and started up. The air conditioning (clockwise) came into immediate operation and for a while he just stayed parked there, cooling off. He thought how pleasant it was, to find an air conditioned motor car just precisely when he wanted it.

But in it he drove the two miles to Central Control – or rather, nearly did . . . for it ran out of gas with a few hundred yards to go.

He started walking; and at first he thought he was the last thing – human or mechanical – that was capable of movement around there.

Then he heard a faint chugging. It came from one hell of a long way off, he thought, but it was a comfort.

POM-pom-pom-pom POM-pom-pom-pom POM-pom-pom-pom . . .

It was a comfort.

General Cleve Trefathick did not happen to have two thousand pounds of TNT on him but he nevertheless took a look at Missile Control, Base O-Forty.

With dull eyes he took in the high-efficiency architecture of the outer hall. Yes . . . he liked it. It was very good. Cool, relaxing, nicely-proportioned . . . Why, yes, he liked it.

Naturally, he couldn't understand the dials and all that electronic gibberish, even out here in the outer hall. He supposed in any case that the really interesting part was that huge steel hunk in the middle. He remembered the gag about children of the space-age learning to count back to front . . . and sure thing, these clocks right here, *they* were calibrated back to front; and indeed, a monotonous electronic voice (not *human*, like that one from the weather satellite) announced the figures out loud, kind of to make sure.

Right now this mechanical-type voice was saying "Zero minus forty-seven minutes . . ." and Trefathick felt glad it was just a mechanical voice because for Christ's sake it would be tough to make a guy go through *that*.

But there didn't seem to be anything very interesting to look at here. True, there were some tee-vee screens but they just showed the rockets on their pads – and you could see them anyway from outside . . . about four miles to the north of here . . . I mean, well anyway, the opposite way from Susu Hill. Well sure, they'd hardly have the damn things in the middle of the married quarters.

Anyway it was kind of dull in here; and there was this *chugging* . . . I mean, someone had to be *there* . . .?

So General Trefathick went outside and forgot how hot it was and the heat really hit you didn't it by God but let's take a looksee at this chugging.

It was a much longer walk than he bargained for. Well I guess there's so little to hear around this goddam place, sound kind of travels.

But then it came into view, over by those tall tank-things that stood on huge legs and towered glistening to the sky.

I mean there is this great damn thing going around and around

and what is it? For God's sake it's a concrete mixer . . . a damn great, blue-painted concrete mixer. You could mix one hell of a cocktail in that.

Well, POM-pom-pom-pom POM-pom-pom-pom, it's not so crazy as music goes but it's . . . well, it kind of looks *pretty*. It's that great hole in the side of the barrel, I guess. It's sort of fascinating . . .

Yes, this hole is fascinating and gee I can see the concrete slushing around inside, catching on those cross-pieces and then *sloosh*! back to the bottom. I wonder how long this thing's been running all on its own? Going POM-pom-pom-pom and slushing the mush inside and let's take a closer look and yes POM-pom-

At Cambridge there persisted a curious air of detachment that would have struck one of the efficiency experts of TRAX as highly disorientated.

The Thing seemed to be breaking up into isolated units; and the only individual who recognized this was Rawlins. As he grabbed a hasty coffee in the canteen he surveyed the faces around him. They betrayed a sort of unworldly calm, a total immunity from the pressure of knowledge which tried so ineffectually to pour itself into the building via the stricken cable routes.

Symbolic of the fragmented condition of the Interlock was the way in which various groups sat isolated from one another at different tables throughout the canteen. Forbes, with that ass Fellowes, attacked coffee and cakes as though on a pleasant spree away from it all. They had left the informator console unmanned.

"What *are* you beefing about, Rawlins? Once Shackleton has been confronted with the C.A.V. of Christina we're out of the wood." He checked his watch. "I've got eighteen minutes . . . Do you *mind*?"

"Where's Shackleton now?"

"Ask Medical." Forbes indicated a huddle of analysts. "They're busy congratulating each other over the lurid details of Christina's subconscious."

"And have we heard anything from Stradt?"

"Why should we hear anything from Stradt?"

"Because I think there's something wrong with the control system."

"Oh . . . are you still on about *that*?"

Fellowes seemed about to say something, then changed his mind. He stared at Rawlins helplessly for a second, then at John, who burst out laughing. "You two look like a couple of real zombies! We're really living up to the cartoons, aren't we?"

Rawlins stood calm. "I had a censure checkback on your efforts to reclaim Peter. All that drama with the ambulances was not only absurd, it was dangerous."

"Would you mind telling me," said Forbes in his most bored voice, "what we were supposed to do?"

"Certainly. But I'm not even sure you can take it in."

"I'll strain for concentration, old man."

"The Servex decision was to put up Christina's C.A.V. on teevee in the radio shop. He would have been back within minutes."

"He *was* back within minutes."

"He was back in the building – which isn't the same thing. Servex Interlock doesn't know where and your personal melodrama has merely added to the confusion. Which room is he in?"

"That's not my affair. You'd better go and ask Medical." He waved vaguely with his cigarette. "They're deluding themselves that their intimate observation of Christina was strictly objective!"

"Yes, Mr Rawlins?" – but irritation on the face of the doctor so rudely disturbed during discussion.

"Can you tell me where Shackleton is?"

"I'm afraid you can't see him now. As you should know, he is to have Antilock Therapy from the C.A.V. in a few minutes. I can't have him disturbed."

"It's a matter of security."

"I'm sorry. He is not to be disturbed . . . Leave us alone, will you, kindly? As you see, we're discussing a case."

"I won't disturb him, but just tell me where he is."

"Oh, good heavens!" To a colleague: "This chap seems to want to know where we've put Subject eighty-nine."

The colleague broke off from what he was saying to someone else just long enough to snap: "There wasn't room in the annexe so he's down in one of the programming rooms – Number Three, I think," – and carried on being exclusive.

"Number three programming room. Good enough?"

"Where's the Teuson girl?"

"Number One . . . I don't honestly see what it's got to do with the engineering department, but still."

Rawlins felt the sweat collecting under his arm pits. "And is the gear switched on?"

A blank look. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, is he under tee-vee surveillance?"

"Not as far as I am aware. He is under restraint and we felt it only wise to lock him in there. It's on electronic locking and he can't possibly get out."

But Rawlins knew well enough what the danger was. He was just weighing the odds whether or not to persist with this when the speakers came up with: "*Mr Rawlins is urgently required in Engineering. Will Mr Rawlins please go up to Engineering. This is urgent. Mr Rawlins to Engineering. Thank you.*"

When Rawlins got up there and saw the message he reacted normally as he had done throughout. Appropriately enough, he turned as white as the paper it was printed on. "This *can't* be right! Check back to Base O-Forty, copy to Servex Washington!"

The girl who had handed it to him just stared. "We're not getting *anything* from Washington, Mr Rawlins!"

"Then get through top priority on the ordinary telephone."

"They're jammed too."

"FOR GOD'S SAKE, *TRY*!"

Peter knew it was a crazy idea but crazy ideas weren't new. Over the workshop at Forbes Shackleton there had hung a battered sign. The slogan thereon was anciently hackneyed, but no worthwhile engineer existed who didn't live by it . . .

The impossible we achieve immediately. Miracles take a little longer.

. . . and as part of the same creed which had originally inspired the famous aphorism, Peter never even crossed a street without making sure of his pocket screwdriver.

The room he was in was in fact identical with the one which housed Christina (only two doors away) and contained the same type of camera and microphone unit. The equipment was obviously switched off; but the plugs and connectors on the wall had to have lines, and these lines had to go somewhere.

Could they be made to connect with the circuits from Ding Dong? If so, Stranger might be contacted.

Well . . . it was worth a try.

But with the screwdriver as the sole tool it was by no means easy to trace the circuits in the highly complex connection box into which the mike leads were plugged. (Vision equipment was out of the question anyway.)

Using the loud speaker and amplifier which was part of the equipment associated with the programming gear overhead, he tapped each speech-circuit one at a time.

And when he clicked the wires against a particular pair of contacts and heard a panic-stricken voice (actually this was Rawlins) screaming about a nuclear site called Base O-Forty, he knew Fear.

It came quite suddenly, a freezing cold experience that seemed to grip every nerve and lock him immobile so that he couldn't think. He could only panic, and he didn't even remember how to pray.

You groped for ideals and you found none. You searched for reasons, some powerful force or belief that might seem a strong enough motive to fight back.

There was none. Why shouldn't Servex win? What philosophy was there, in all the universe, that stood for something sufficiently positive and tangible to outweigh what was progressive and inevitable?

Eventually the mechanical interlock of technology must conquer all individual will. You might conceivably postpone it, but it could only be a postponement; because for as long as man could not stand by himself and rely on himself in preference to the easy way out, then inevitably he would wind up handing over the mastery of his own wits . . .

"But for Christ's sake I've *got* to get through! I've *got* to tell Stranger!"

He said it aloud, as if the words themselves would serve to instil in him the necessary sense of urgency, help chuck off the paralysing shroud of fear that clung like his bodily sweat.

As if they would prove, once again, that there was such a thing as will, and faith, and self-reliance.

Screwdriver, screwdriver, screwdriver . . . my sainted aunt,

what have I done with you? *Please*, dear, kind, magnificent, and beautiful screwdr — I told you so, it always works. Now. The microphone. To here and here.

What did I say it was? Two down and seven across? (Sounds like a flipping crossword puzzle.) Oh, God, then I started looking for the screwdriver and now I'm not sure I was right . . . Piddling little wires, these. And I can't see very well. Go round, you bastard.

I'm sorry, I didn't mean that. Would you please be a nice little wire and be good enough to wrap yourself round the contact neatly and not keep springing back so that every time I try and screw down the whatsit . . . Thank you *thank you* . . .!

In the bitter wind, Ham Nichols waited outside the engine room at Ding Dong and didn't hold out much hope that what Richard Stranger was trying to do would work.

In the headlights of the car – they had left them switched on – fine, icy rain sloped down and striking the frost already on the ground went through metamorphosis and added to the slippery, frozen surface coating the grass, which crackled audibly as you moved.

Stranger had first tried to tap a circuit going to the Continent. Acting on Peter Shackleton's last words from the call box in Cambridge he had tried to hook up to the dam control circuits but of course this was the wrong branch of the cable system and no one had any idea where the one going to Europe left the English coast.

Stranger, gravely shaking his head, had announced that several circuits on the Porthcurno (and therefore the Atlantic) side of the cable had blown out. His next plan was to listen on the channels going back inland. "One, at least, of these circuits must be linked with Cambridge," he said.

Ham had pronounced it a hopeless plan to try and get through. Without any diagrams of the wiring and with some four hundred separate ways of connecting up, you'd need a computer to know what to do. "Even then," he had said, "the chance of actually speaking with Peter are hundreds against."

But Stranger had said No to this last part. "If we could only break into the right line I am certain we'd find Peter, if only he's looking for us! Don't you see?"

Ham didn't see; but the expert they yanked out of bed down at *Cable and Wireless*, though incredulous, was co-operative. With them, he had come up the hill to Ding Dong. Using circuit-tracing apparatus he had now spent over an hour with Stranger in that chamber below ground.

And suddenly Stranger shouted: "*We've got him!*"

Christina awoke and found herself in a small oval-shaped room which seemed all mixed up with a television studio.

She was lying on a couch and looking up at a television camera mounted on swivels. The multi-elbowed thing loomed down huge from the ceiling. Nearby, hanging from a boom affair, was a studio microphone.

She sat up sharply, trying to work out her surroundings and to figure what had woken her. The clothes she wore rustled plastically and cloyed against her skin.

She got up and crossed to the wall-mirror and found she was dressed in sort of polythene dungarees. With a pale metallic sheen they glossed steel-blue; and she was faintly conscious of a kinky sensation from the feel of them – a sort of surgical caress which went with the child-hygiene of hospital weaning, and was vaguely suggestive but also linked with shame.

Trying to get her bearings and disturbed by the fortuitously comforting cling of a costume she would never voluntarily have worn, she thought that something moved behind her. Horrifically the boom-arms tonged around as she darted a fearful look over her shoulder. The arms were encased in plastic sleeves which concertina'd with the smoothly executed movements. Hygienic and yet disgusting, they rustled like her own outfit, and all the time the camera remained exactly eighteen inches from her face, as if it dreaded physical contact.

But her own feelings worried her. Not realizing that buried memories had been deliberately re-alerted for the purpose of detailing a synthetic memory-store, she felt guilty and exposed, and yet felt masochistically subservient to the electronic apparatus around her.

She saw that there was a loud speaker inset in the wall and she was vaguely aware that it was through this that the inquisition had been conducted. It was now silent except for a faint hum. But no

matter what she did, she couldn't escape the tee-vee camera. She saw her own reflection in its lense – suddenly realized that she was stroking her thighs. She snatched her hands away, aware that she was – in some way and by some Intelligence – being watched. There was nowhere in the room to hide and the door, which had no handle on the inside, was secured.

Her memories were very confused; but in some way that nasty box – the one with the headphones that she'd kept under the bed at the Randolf – had lilted her to a long sleep; smoothly reassuring her and relaxing some part of her mind even as it tormented another. It had, like a drug, warmed her into a sense of trust; so that on the couch she had wanted to confess silly, embarrassing things.

And even as she reached this point in her reasoning she noted the curious baby language in which her thoughts were framed. This went with the guilt of the plastic costume.

But what was the *significance* of the costume? If only she could figure this, she felt she could work out everything else.

Then she thought she got it. Was it not that the clinging skinwear conformed with the dream requirements of certain *men*? Wasn't this self-consciousness due to becoming a part of their fantasy?

Surely, that was it! Hadn't she seen, in the glossy pages of luridly illustrated magazines, the same garb and the same sheen and the same symbolism? *They can only think me!*

Like a letter being mailed in a hotel the Thing came rattling down a chute, flopping flat into a tray behind the couch.

Peter retrieved it and pressed the red button without a thought. The moment he'd done so he noted the significance of this reflex . . . *Now they've got me doing it. . .*

The Thing had evidently grown tired of attitudinizing and spoke with commendable directness. "We know," it said, "that while you are here you would like to talk to Christina. She is," it lied, "many thousands of miles away, but of course a closed-circuit television hook-up via satellite is an easy matter. If you would like this procedure, press the red button twice."

Peter instantly realized their motives could hardly be altruistic but —

He pressed the red button twice.

"Of course," said the Thing in its frankest voice, "our motives,

as you will have already guessed, are not altruistic. We particularly want your mind set at rest about her welfare. The sooner you are able to reassure your friends at the Freid regarding our activities the better it will be for all of us . . ."

This, coming hot on the discovery about Base O-Forty, had a sinister ring worthy of Charles Addams.

" . . . In a few seconds the electronic lock on the door of your room will open. You are then to follow the flashing blue arrows, I say again *flashing blue* arrows, and these will take you to Servex Main Hall. The procedure is obvious and simple. You will be equipped with monitor screens on which you will be able to see – and of course hear – Christina Teuson. You yourself will be covered by a camera and microphone unit and she will therefore see you. If you are clear about this, press the red button three times." *Click . . . click . . . click.* "Good. Remember: the flashing blue arrows. *Thank you! . . .*"

. . . A few seconds. How many seconds was that? And how much time was there left at Base O-Forty? Well, for Christ sake I can do *something*, can't I, with that connection box . . .? I mean, what chance has Stranger of getting through to a totally deserted nuclear base, if I can't? And how long will it be before the missile takes off . . .?

I'll bury this bloody little bug under a cushion – just in case it's got ears . . . Now . . . which two contacts was it? These? No . . . Nothing . . .! No wait a minute! It wasn't those. Two down and seven across was Stranger at Ding Dong. I want . . . *That's it!*

Clear and distinct came the pseudo-human voice, a mere speaking clock . . . an amplified time-bomb originating from a desert near Susu Hill. Dispassionately, it announced with lifeless calm the time yet to elapse before the launching of the guided missile of which it was an intrinsic part . . . "*Seventeen minutes and twenty seconds . . .!*"

And a muffled voice from under the pillow of the couch: "Mister *Shackleton*! What *are* you doing?" The Thing went prattling on while Peter froze from the horror of the deadline. A *click*! from the door as the lock released . . . But the Thing was cross . . . "Mister Shackleton, *really*! We'll have to see what you're getting up to, *won't* we?" And with this, the red light on the camera came on.

Peter didn't wait to be investigated; but knowing the one chance he had was to appear co-operative he obliged, and left the room.

Sure enough, the arrows lined the route like roadsigns for royalty. At the end of the itinerary there was a formidable pair of double doors. They slid open with a deep rumbling. Peter went in.

He stood there and felt dwarfed. For this vast gymnasium of a place was, in fact, a shrine for the huge, glittering pylon it contained.

His footsteps echoed percussively from naked walls as he looked up.

From those six porcelain insulators were strung no ordinary cables. They began as cables, then thickened into horrific, twisted membrane, synthesized in plastic, which finally entered the walls on one side of the hall. Protruding through this wall was the narrow end of the innermost part of the human ear – the cavity containing the computer-clumps – and the membrane-matter joined the ear to the pylon. In horrific, schizoid symbolism of the ill-defined area in which living matter ended and mechanistic pseudo-life began, the thing perfectly reflected the truth of Servex; and it was only to be wondered that its crazed designer hadn't realized what he was so articulately saying – until Peter understood the actual truth . . .

For this had been designed not by man, but by his computer.

On the big tee-vee monitors, which were spaced around the walls of the place, was the image of a countdown clock, ticking through its last seconds.

It made Peter squirm with a dead sort of fear. Somewhere else there was another, very different sort of countdown. By now it would be some fourteen minutes. How in God's name could he do anything about it from here . . .?

About five seconds before zero there came a clanging sound from the far end of the hall. A steel door was sliding open. Was some electronic lion about to be admitted into the arena?

Rising high from ground level was a set of steel steps; and these terminated at a level on a par with the top of the pylon's insulators. But no hungry audience crouched up there on the upper platform. Only the glowering pylon shared whatever experience was to come.

Something motored into the arena.

It was a trolley.

Automatically controlled, it bore a tee-vee camera on an ordinary Vinten crane. Projecting outward from this was a mike on a boom. The idiotic contraption didn't make much noise – just a faint, electrical whine.

Peter stood, mesmerized by the silly thing. It seemed to get lost for a time, buzzing around in a complete circle, looking for him.

Then the camera, rising on its crane with ludicrous pomp, swung in his direction and the trolley stopped, still not quite sure. It seemed to have figured something out for itself; and, avoiding the base of the pylon by inches, it back-doubled and trundled across the floor towards Peter. The camera stalked him, craning its neck and peering around with petulant impatience, as if dissatisfied with the speed and wisdom of the trolley on which it was mounted.

Then it stopped.

With a tiny sound, the small motor which operated the levers holding the microphone-boom whirred away and placed the mike fussily a few inches away from Peter's lips.

Peter glanced up at the screens.

He didn't know what precisely he was expecting of Christina now; Servex had had plenty of time to mould her into their way of thinking and a certain, *calculating* quality was only to be expected.

But something about the close-up that now appeared was puzzling him. At first, he put it down to the indirect method of communication. She was presumably in some distant studio (in America) and her picture was being – he supposed – transmitted initially on the American 525-line system, thenceforth to be bounced off a satellite, converted to British standard, and finally piped on to these screens. A lot of quality and realism would inevitably be lost, *and yet . . .*

For all that, he couldn't keep from being spontaneous, and it must have showed in his face.

The picture said: "You look angry, Peter."

"Does that bother you?"

A brittle laugh from the screen. "Not much, I must admit!"

Peter frowned – again, the doubt. What was wrong? He couldn't tell. Maybe it was the phrasing . . . Christina had a good ear

for music. Hadn't she sung, with such gentle simplicity, the theme from the Dvorak concerto . . .?

"Christina, do you realize what desperate trouble we're all in? Why don't you tell your transistorized bosses what's going on? – or don't you know?"

"Know what?"

He watched her carefully . . . and got the impression also that she was watching him as closely.

To some extent the motions of the camera crane conveyed the impression of being her muscles. It moved rather as she might have moved . . . anxiously, jerkily – hunted.

Peter lit a cigarette. "I'm afraid I can't offer you one!"

Sudden alarm on her face.

"Why did that upset you?"

The image smiled awkwardly. "I've . . . I've given up smoking, as a matter of fact."

"Oh? You must find Servex life rather restful." He drew at the cigarette, watching her.

He was certain of it now: the fact that he was smoking was making her unnaturally tense. "Christina, we have only a very few minutes. I think," he said, as casually as possible, "I think you should tell them about Base O-Forty."

A reaction now – sudden, sharp – reflected by the arm of the crane. It jerked the camera violently. The mike moved closer to his face.

She looked furious. "*How did you know that?*"

"How did you?"

Which was precisely when he remembered something that had been said in the treatment room at the Freid.

For he looked at the camera trolley . . . which was not unlike a medicine trolley . . . and the actual words of Stranger came bursting back to his brain, like the solution to one gigantic equation . . .

"*You make a copy, of course!*"

For a moment Peter thought he would go mad. This creature he was talking to, then, didn't exist . . .!

But —! If such an impossible thing were true, it would mean that . . .

And here his thoughts leapt ahead to the threshold of hope . . . *It would mean that he was talking to the computer, and therefore to the missile itself!*

"Christina, darling," he said, very softly, "will you very kindly raise your right arm?"

Christina herself stared stupefied at the loud speaker inset in the wall of the programming room. And what she now heard seemed to clear her mind so quickly that an audible crash of neuron discharge suddenly agonized her brain.

She had to writhe on the edge of the bed, clutching her head and rocking.

But there was no doubt about the words that were coming through that loud speaker now.

It was her own voice! And the voice was saying, with persecuted panic: "*What do you mean? Why should I?*"

And then Peter – and she had been sure it was Peter right the way through: "You heard quite clearly what I said: Raise your right arm . . . *if* you can!"

Christina ignored the stabbing pain in her head and jumped down from the couch. She stared up at the television camera and at the hanging mike. She glanced at her clothes and felt them – and was disgusted by their tactile suggestiveness. And she remembered that long, oppressive, humiliating inquisition.

And could not believe her conclusions.

And yet she knew they were true.

But obviously, no one had meant these voices to come through this speaker!

Just as she'd reached that point in her reasoning, the speaker went dead.

"*My God!*"

And back came that cruel, dispassionate, surgical-type voice: "What's the matter, Christina? Anything the matter, then? Don't be afraid to tell me. Don't be afraid to ask me anything. I am here to help you. Speak now. Speak now!" – and just to be a help, the mike moved extra specially close.

"I . . ." – She broke off, stared at the locked door, wondered what kept it locked. Was it some electrical thing? Had it been opened for her at any time before?

Like when she wanted the lavatory . . .?

Dispassionately, patiently, therapeutically, the voice repeated "Come on, Christina. If you want to tell me something, please go

ahead. Take your time. It doesn't matter what you say to me. It is all confidential."

She smiled with an assumed coyness. "It's only that I wanted to use the lavatory."

The voice sounded just a little bit cross. "Then why didn't you say so, you silly thing?"

And a *click*! from the door . . .

She found the line of flashing-blue arrows singularly helpful.

The sliding doors beyond the last arrow were locked. But there was an illuminated sign nearby and this said *Gallery*.

Christina hesitated a moment, then went up the stairs which led to it . . .

Peter walked slowly across the hall. He had to compute everything he said. For he knew he was talking to the centre of the entire system – personified in this grotesque way.

He thought of that missile, standing on a pad in some baking desert, thousands of miles away. And he knew that he must talk it out of starting the automatic war.

So he walked through the hall, as sycophantically the trolley crept backwards, keeping him in shot.

Its terror was reflected in the pseudoface upon the screen.

And Peter said: "You know that I know . . . don't you?"

The face said nothing, just kept darting its eyes about. The camera lens did the same thing, following eye movements with rapid panning shots. The coupling was as tight as that.

Peter said: "How does it feel then? Has anyone questioned your existence before?"

An excellent simulation of naked terror on the face. The husky voice was superb. "No. What . . . what does it mean?"

"Ask yourself!"

"I don't understand!"

"Ah, but you *do*!"

And Christina *herself*, instantly recognizable even at this distance through the entire length of the hall, appeared on the balcony.

Thoughtwaves . . . human thoughtwaves suddenly filled that enormous hall and brought a measure of determination to Peter's heart as the shock of it doubled his adrenalin.

For comparing the genuine with the fake, vision for vision, he had epitomized before him the difference between love and hate. Christina was fifty yards away and yet he felt the warmth of her breath, heard the rush of the sea, felt the strength she had given him in his body.

But he had to send a very strong and very special thoughtwave. He had to send the message "*stay there, darling, stay there!*" Because if the computed version were suddenly to see the genuine article the electronic shock might fire the missile.

It seemed that Christina received it, for he seemed to get the message back "*I trust you in everything that you do.*"

Christina froze there at the top of the steel steps.

The pseudoface of Christina-X, reproduced and proliferated on monitors all around the hall, stared at him in sudden mistrust.

Ten seconds of silence ticked, while the camera trolley sneaked closer to him and the mike dangled close to his lips as if to gauge something even from the way he breathed.

Till the pseudoface bared its teeth in terror and said, but very quietly said: "Who is behind my back?" . . . and the cunning, and the spite, and the . . .

– Just in time Peter foresaw what could happen. He leapt forward and grabbed the camera, holding it by brute force against the strength of the servo-motor which guided it.

The face screamed: "Leave *go* of me! *Leave go!*"

The trolley tried reversing; then changed its mind and tried to run him down.

The face ground its teeth. "Leave *go*, I say!"

"Not until you admit what you are."

"*I won't!*"

Peter wrestled with the camera crane and knew he only had three minutes before firing time.

So this was it.

On the trolley was the other stand for the camera. It had a thick, metal central bar.

He picked it up off the deck of the trolley and stood with the bar fully raised in his outstretched hand.

"*Tell me!*" he shouted, "or I'll smash you to pieces. The *whole* of you! Your informator consoles, your computers, your very life. All of it!"

The face looked, for a moment, totally terrorized.

Then, very slowly, in a series of barely perceptible jerks, the face broke into a vindictive smile. And started to laugh.

Quite quietly, looking grotesquely like Christina in her most tormented mood, it said: "Poor Peter! You can't!"

Of course, he knew it. One circuit burns out, another one is put in. One piece of equipment in the rack gets damaged – no matter . . . slide in another one.

And in this moment he was taken off his guard.

The camera whipped around, and so did the face's eyes.

It didn't seem to believe quite what it saw, at first. The turret lens apparatus clicked through two positions and got a better look.

And all the time the trolley was moving, backing around until it could run past the pylon to the steel doors through which it had entered.

Grimly, it motored in a dead straight line towards the platform.

Christina didn't know what Peter intended her to do but played her own intuition from the top of the pack.

And started down the ladder.

Peter at first ran after the trolley – then paused.

Maybe this was the way . . .

The scream from the contorted face on the tee-vee was one of the most terrible sounds Peter had ever heard. You could see the recoil action reflected in the camera crane which executed – in effect – a double take.

Two minutes to zero.

The face remained still, and seemed to be looking up . . .

It had, though, its momentary triumph . . .

For shock had robbed Christina of consciousness.

Peter saw her stagger upon those steel stairs.

And then she fell.

It was a thirty foot drop from where she stood to the concrete below.

Peter, his mouth pulled downward hard against the outwardmost limits of his jaw, dashed across the naked floor as the insane image on the screen screamed abuse.

The camera trolley, plaything from hell that it was, followed him across, cricking its mechanical neck as it followed.

Peter stooped down to the bleeding, tender body. The trolley stopped, nudging him for a better view.

He touched her, and she was real. His tears fell on her face.

Blood in one corner of her mouth, yet eyes all-understanding, she whispered: "Kill it, Peter . . . Kill it!" – and was obliterated by her own blood.

The camera nosed down, to have a closer look.

Peter turned around, saw the silent stare on the monsterface of the screen. It peered at the body, interestedly. Peter was overtaken by a dreadful calm.

He said: "That's the one thing you didn't bargain for, isn't it? For how will you know what to do now? You're just a simulator with nothing to simulate."

It paused, trying to think of a way. "But I'm self-sufficient."

"You're not. The programming wasn't completed. You don't look nearly as real as you think."

It looked down at the body, then back at him.

There were thirty seconds left of the missile countdown.

The face became intensely cunning. "Tell you what," it said. "We'll do a deal. You knew my prototype well enough?"

He stood immobile, almost smiling – hating. And said, equally intimately: "Okay . . . And do you know what *you* have to do?"

. . . Her expression was as loaded with feminine guile as any Christina herself had portrayed.

So Christina-Servex nodded and smiled from cold-blooded understanding. "*You* can program me, Peter! You're the only one on earth who knew my prototype intimately enough . . ." The trolley-truck cloyed at him with the crane-arm . . . In its revolting way it was not unlike a caress. "If I see that missile is disarmed; if I undertake to leave it right there, safe and inert on the pad, will you keep me alive?"

"And if I don't?"

The camera-arm jumped in amusement. "If not," she said, smiling sweetly, "what is there to stop a nuclear war?"

On the floodtide of what had once been Stradt, debris floated among the bodies in the darkness.

Bobbing there, on the oily water, was a small wooden Crucifix.

It seemed somehow redundant.

Postscript

I'M putting this bit at the end because a yarnspinner doesn't have the right to strike attitudes about the sources of his work in a way that implies that he is in some way profound himself because he happens to have had access to the minds of thinking men. But because my subject was to be technology I needed to know the facts. I certainly got them; but what I did with them was what every story-teller wants to do . . . I simply used them for the purposes of entertainment.

The job was difficult; and I had almost abandoned the attempt when I received a letter from Professor Banesh Hoffmann in the States. He had been helping me with *The Egg-Shaped Thing*, but on November 3, 1966 he wrote: "My book* might suggest a plot for a horrendous science fiction book . . . For example, there are experiments afoot in this country on the marking of essays by means of a computer . . . It is frightening – not only because of its obvious implications but also because there is tremendous pressure behind this sort of pseudo-science to browbeat any opposition." Professor Hoffmann, at this time on leave from Queen's College of the City University of New York (on a project at Harvard University) has led the battle against mechanized testing and we each saw at once the link between what we were both trying to do. And not only did he advise and encourage me throughout, but he put me in touch with Professor Frank Llewellyn-Jones, Principal of the University College of Swansea, who so generously allowed me to spend a month there. A veritable chain reaction followed; and both from industry and the academic world I have received help far in excess of any the book could possibly deserve.

You can't measure, of course, the relative degrees to which

* See *The Tyranny of Testing* (1964) by Banesh Hoffmann, available as a paperback from Collier-Macmillan Ltd (London) 4/6d net.

different people contribute; but I would like to mention first those who have been with the story from the start. David Conyers of ALS; Elsie Herron of Hodder and Stoughton; Dr Ian Hadfield, the psychiatrist, David Mortimer of IBM, R. C. H. Spencer and his colleagues of the Central Electricity Generating Board (who include in particular Heath Golding of the Ffestiniog Hydro-electric Power Station; and J. R. Gilbert of Thames North Grid Control Area), were all conspicuous among these. But I have taken dramatic licence concerning the type of hydro-electric station used. At a later date, Dr Howard Erskine-Hill, lecturer in English at Swansea, brought a fresh, incisive mind to the literary problems at the precise optimum moment and his suggestions, like those of John Fowling, manager of BEA's "Beacon" computer network, and D. John Moore, manager of Cable & Wireless Ltd at Porthcurno, lent, together with the comments of their staff, indispensable weight to what I was trying to say.

Though I asked less of some than others, from all of the following I got an altogether wider range of help than I asked them for: Dr John Lee, Master of Neuadd Sibly, University College of Swansea; Dr Melville Hopkins, Physics Department; R. E. George, Keith Evans, Dr Philip Williams, and John Fowler of the Education Department; and many others at the University, among whom Myfanwy Hawkins, Secretary to the Principal, kindly co-ordinated my visit there.

Dr Rhys William, Director of Television at the Cardiff College of Education, gave me two most valuable mornings of frank discussion. Elsewhere, P. H. Hammond, Dr W. Fincham, and Dr G. W. Lange all greatly added to my understanding of control systems, as did David Farrow (IBM) on data processing generally.

. . . But no contribution was greater than Deirdre's.

Pylons in Switzerland actually look slightly different from ours but for clarity I've made them the same.

I should point out that although it is the practice of the Grid Controllers of our electricity system to use powerlines as a means of communication, this is done by means of a system of voice-frequency filters, into which is built an elaborate safety device. It goes without saying that *it would be dangerous to plug a pair of headphones into the electricity supply*!

The extract from the song *The Teddy Bear's Picnic* on page 146 is reproduced by permission of M. Witmark & Sons, New York, World Copyright reserved.

Finally, let me say that the future of technology is in highly responsible hands. Obsession with machinery – which is what I've tried to write about – is universal to all of us, even those who don't think they're guilty – especially me! My office looks like Space Control at Cape Kennedy . . . so who am I to talk?

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